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BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No 27

FRANK WARREN
ALCHEMIST

The Diamond
Makers



by

WELDON J. COBB

At the sight of Gil's revolvers the thieves executed a prompt retreat.

BRAVE & BOLD

A Different Complete Story Every Week

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FRANK WARREN, ALCHEMIST;

OR,

The Diamond Makers.

BY WELDON J. COBB.

CHAPTER I.

A OR X?

"Get out!"

"You bet!"

"And stay out!"

"Won't I?"

Frank Warren, typical California boy, all fire, pluck and spunk, shot out the rapid replies, eyes flashing, erect, indignant.

The scene was the library of one of the handsomest residences in that great magnet city of the Pacific coast—Los Angeles.

Frank stood in the center of the apartment looking like a young knight-errant facing a dragon and ready and eager for a combat.

Lolling in a huge armchair, clad in a gaudy smoking jacket, a languid, dude-like young man not many years his senior, glared angrily at him.

This was Fred Warren, but no relation to Frank—for which the latter was devoutly thankful!

"Get out! get out! get out!" he repeated in an irritable snarl. "Through with you for good!"

"Are you?" fired up Frank. "Mistake."

"Oh!"

"It's me that's through with you. Drop it, you coward!" cried Frank, jumping at the other till that other trembled. "Pull a bell, summon a servant, and I'll—I'll give you something worse than a tongue-lashing!"

"Terrible! My poor shattered nerves! Doctor says—"

"That you're a cigarette wreck, a fast-set idiot. Know what I

say—the meanest sneak I ever met. Now then, I'm going, I'm going for good, but—you sit still in that chair, and hear what I've got to say till I'm through."

The gorgeous lounging looked uncomfortable and frightened.

"Briefly," began Frank, speaking like a trained lawyer and orator, "I've lived here for two years, practically the adopted son of Mr. Felix Warren, who died a few months ago."

"Most accommodatingly."

"Faugh! You harpy. He was interested in me simply because our names were the same. When you came along he was whimsical enough for a like reason to be attracted toward you."

"I caught his fancy, yes."

"He died. He had told me that I should be his heir—"

"The will was opened—"

"And instead of Frank A. Warren, myself, being named in it, the legatee of all this wealth was—"

"Fred X. Warren, your humble servant, exactly!" gibed the other.

"I felt that wrong had been done me," pursued Frank. "I had a mind to contest the will. I suspected that some one had doctored it. It was easy to make F. A. Warren F. X. Warren—only a stroke of an ink-eraser and a pen."

"Ridiculous!" commented Fred Warren, but he looked a trifle white about the lips.

"I pass that. I allowed my chance to slip by me. You wheedled me into making no row. You said what you had I should share. I began no contest. The property was settled on you."

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"Sure and solid!" chuckled Fred.

"Then you showed your cloven foot. You began to sneer at me, to cut me. To-day I heard that you denounced me at your club of empty-pated idlers as a sponge, a pauper!"

"I—I—"

"Shut up!" shouted the excited Frank, and he looked dangerous enough to shut the speaker up if he did not do it himself. "Don't lie. You have used me for your crafty purposes, and are now ready to ship me."

"Well, I can't stand being sassed in my own house, you know."

"I am going, but I am going to say this first: I now believe you are not entitled to one dollar of Mr. Warren's property."

"I've got it, all the same."

"I believe by some hocus-pocus you changed an A to an X in the will."

"Prove it."

"It shall be the effort of my life!"

Frank spoke so solemnly, so resolutely, that his auditor blinked.

"I give you warning. Look out for yourself. You've got a cozy nest here. Warm it while you may. Some day I'll cast you out as you now cast me out—neck and heels. That's my say!"

That was Frank's "say," and his sturdy lips closed meaningfully, but it was not his finish.

His auditor goggled as Frank tore off his coat, his vest, his natty silk tie.

He cast them at the feet of the gaper with the air of a king spurning a crown stained with dishonor.

Off came his shirt studs, his watch, his chain, two rings, and out from his pocket a well-filled wallet.

"Take them back," he spoke defiantly. "The livery of a briber! I'd go in rags before I'd be beholden to you for one shred. Now, then, I get out, but you—look out!"

Frank marched from the apartment, arrow-straight, heart mightily nerved under an impulse of profound determination. He went to his own room, and from a closet took a suit of clothes.

It was one he had not worn for two years—patched, but clean; coarse, but paid for with his own money.

"I wore that when I first came here," he spoke, soberly, "and now it's back to where I started from—a homeless wanderer, capital—pluck and hope. No, I forgot—something else; a purpose in life—to get my rights in this Warren estate, and I'm going to do it."

The light had faded so by the time that Frank had got his old suit on that he could barely see his only earthly possessions—an old Mexican dollar, a knife and a gold pencil.

"Don't know where I'm going to land," he told himself, starting for the door, "but straight out of this house first. Hello!"

Frank dodged to the window. Just below it was the library. From outside came up a suspicious sound—half whistle, half call.

The occupant of the library had lit a gas jet. Its radiance cast through the open window made a bright spot on the lawn.

There, like a statue, with a halo around it, stood a man plainly revealed—slouchily-attired, dissipated-looking.

The minute Frank's eyes fell upon him he gave a great start.

"Why!" he voiced in a flutter, "it's Belton, the absconding clerk of Mr. Warren's lawyer—the man who ran away with some money, and has not been heard of since. What is he ever doing here?"

Going through some pantomime, it appeared, and Frank watched him interestedly.

The man threw a handful of gravel into the library. There was a disturbed cry.

"Who—how—oh, the dickens!" gasped its occupant, coming to the window.

"It's me," spoke the man outside, with an intoxicated leer.

"Get away! get away!"

"No!"

"I'll—I'll—have you arrested."

"Try it."

"What do you want?"

"More money. A hundred this time."

"Never!"

"Go to, or—"

The ex-clerk did a funny thing just here—three funny things, in fact.

Quick as a flash he raised both arms till they formed a distinct cross.

He snatched up two sticks—of these he made a distinct cross.

He stepped to the gravel path. With his patched, ragged shoe toe he scratched in it a distinct cross.

Then he chuckled, and opening his mouth to its widest he aspirated one hissing impressive:

"X!"

The absorbed Frank felt a wild thrill sweep over him—the man was not making crosses, but X's—in other words, the initial of Fred Warren's middle name!

And he was the clerk who had been employed in Mr. Warren's lawyer's office all the time the will reposed in its vault.

"A hundred," he piped. "Hear me? On the nail-head now, or I'll tell who changed an A to an X."

Frank could not repress a mighty cry. Here, at his very feet, was the clew to all he wished to prove.

Beyond doubt, Fred Warren had hired this dissolute embezzler to change the will, and the latter had returned for another bribe.

"Take it, go, get away!" he heard Fred gasp, and a roll of bills flew out on the gravel path.

"Stop!"

Just as the man stooped to pick up the money, the excited Frank glided over the upper window sill.

"Stop, you embezzler; stop, you plotter!" he shouted. "Ah, Fred Warren! I have learned the truth at last!"

With a startling rush the speaker came to the ground. He had grabbed at a trellis, but this tearing loose with him, Frank landed amid a wreck of splinters and vines.

As he struggled free he made out Fred Warren with an apalled face urging his ragged visitor to hasten away, the latter making a frightened break through the extensive rear gardens.

Frank realized that tremendous issues hung on the detention of Fred Warren's emissary—his confession would reveal everything.

Through some magnificent flowers the man ran. At their end began a space given over to glass-covered beds, where delicate exotics were raised. The frightened fugitive dashed recklessly through these.

Smash—bang—crackety-clip—the frail panes went fluttering to fragments like rubber ice.

"Stop! I tell you!" panted Frank.

"Stop, you—you vandals!" yelled a new voice.

The gardener came running from the toolhouse, dashed back, and hurried out again with a revolver in his hand.

Frank had put after the fugitive step for step, recklessly breaking what panes of glass the other missed.

He was close upon his heels. He could catch his panting breath, he fairly clutched his flying coattails, when he stumbled,

Flat went Frank. He got up, cut and bruised, for he had flattened out a sash with twenty lights in it.

"Gone!" he cried in a frenzy. "The man has slipped me. Stop that!"

Frank dodged.

Crack—bang!

The gardener, shouting "Thieves!" "Fire!" "Police!" had turned his pistol loose on the supposed vandal who was ruining his beautiful garden.

Crack—bang!

Frank had lost sight of the fugitive ex-clerk. He had to think of his own safety solely now.

A third bullet pierced his cap, and he dodged past the last garden sash.

Here an incline descended to a pool where water-lilies were grown.

At its top was a huge terra-cotta tile, which was to be used in the garden as a pillar grown over with vines.

Behind it Frank dodged. Crack! came a bullet, glinting dangerously near to him.

Into its end, for better security, piled Frank, yelling at the frantic gardener that it was all a mistake.

In the darkness, however, the shooter had eyes only for burglars and marauders.

"Say!" exploded Frank the minute he climbed into the pipe.

His rough entrance had dislodged the light wedges holding it in position.

It quivered, turned, and rolled with a sudden dash downward.

Half the descent accomplished, it struck a rock.

Crash! went one brittle end, the particles striking Frank in a shower.

With new impetus the pipe resumed descent.

Over and over it went, and over and over spun its living freight.

Then, splash!—it struck the pool, and down into four feet of water, completely immersed, went pipe and Frank.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN WITH THE CLOTHES-PIN.

"Hello!"

"Hello, yourself—getting blind?"

Frank was mad as a hatter, and came very near to pitching into the gardener, as dripping, bruised and banged generally, he staggered out of the pond.

"Didn't know it was you," began the gardener, apologetically. "Who was the other fellow?"

"Ask your lordly master!" snapped Frank. "And, say! tell him I'm on that other fellow's track like a ferret!"

Frank, nettled, worried, excited, left the gardener staring after him vaguely.

He did not mind his own discomfort so greatly as the loss of the fugitive.

The ex-clerk, Belton, had hidden away for six months. Provided with money, would he make a second disappearance?

Frank hunted around the place, its vicinity, that quarter of the city for over an hour.

"Give it up; he's slipped me," admitted Frank, finally. "Well, I've found out something—the will was changed! I know my rights clearly now, and I'm going to fight for them."

A characteristic Pacific coast boy, born "where gold grows," and full of the true gold of ready wit, perseverance and courage himself, Frank soon decided what to do.

Hé knew where the most famous lawyer in Los Angeles lived. He was at his door of his study an hour later.

Frank stated a hypothetical case involving all the points of his own. The lawyer listened indulgently.

"Good grounds for a contest, young man," he pronounced. "You are, it seems to me, sure to win."

"Will you take the matter in hand?"

"Ha, hum—with a retaining fee paid down, yes."

"How much?"

"One thousand dollars."

"Not without?"

"Too busy on sure business."

"Thank you; I may call again."

Frank was disappointed. It took money to get money, he saw that.

He carried the conviction to bed with him as he sought rest on the bench of a park—he realized still the importance of the sentiment when he awoke the next morning.

He spent an anxious hour looking for a chance to earn his breakfast, got it and a quarter besides helping a milkman deliver on his route, and about ten o'clock strolled thoughtfully down a busy retail street.

"I'm not going to spoil things by making any rash breaks—I'll not directly antagonize that thieving Fred Warren until I've got some power of influence and protection behind me," Frank told himself. "The lawyer says I've got a good case, but it takes money to fight money, and the other side has lots of it. I'll nurse things along, and be patient till I'm ready to start in. Now, then, money—how am I going to get it? Why, earn it, of course. There's no other way."

As if circumstances were combining to help Frank out, he just then read, across the windows of the nearest store front, a stimulating sign:

STEADY WORK

Given

MEN, WOMEN and BOYS.

Also Mules.

Frank guessed that here was one of those agencies which secure employment for clerks, servants, railroad gangs, teamsters and the like.

He entered the place, to see a dozen persons wearily waiting on a bench.

"I want work, sir," he announced, approaching the clerk at a desk.

"Good. One dollar."

"Eh?"

"Fee."

"What for?"

"You don't suppose we start people in life for nothing, do you?"

"N—no, but I'll pay you out of my first salary——"

"Won't do. Not our system."

Frank reflected, fingering his pocketpiece, the Mexican dollar.

"If I pay, am I guaranteed a situation?" he asked.

"Certainly."

Frank produced the dollar, and the clerk took down his name.

"You're No. 3218," he stated.

"What am I to do?"

"Sit down and wait your chance. Over yonder."

"Over yonder" was the hardest bench Frank had ever occupied, and his "chance" seemed dim at noon, a flickering delusion at two o'clock, a moral uncertainty by four.

He understood the "system" of the employment office very

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quickly; it was: pay your dollar and wait for something to turn up!

He was angry at himself for getting roped in, and decided to give the clerk a piece of his mind and depart, when a man entered the door with a query that checked the impulse.

He was a stoop-shouldered person, perhaps sixty years of age, with studious, intelligent eyes, and rather grim facially, but he looked thoroughly reliable and respectable.

"Got any boys to hire out here?" he demanded, crisply.

"Lots of them," vouchsafed the clerk.

"Want one."

"A dollar, please."

"Eh?"

"Fee."

"Oh!"

Frank got another glimpse into a "system" that exacted toll at both ends of the line.

The man paid the fee. The clerk consulted his register ponderingly.

"No. 3218!" he called out, as if singling an applicant from an army.

Frank stepped forward promptly.

"That's the boy?" interrogated the newcomer, casting an eye over Frank that bored him like a gimlet.

"That's him, honest, industrious—"

"I'll find that out for myself. Come here, boy."

Frank had met some queer people in his time, but he voted his prospective employer to be the most singular man he had ever run across.

The latter put on a pair of spectacles, he studied Frank's face, and Frank decided that he must be a professional physiognomist.

He ran his fingers over the bumps on Frank's head, and Frank changed his mind—the man was an expert phrenologist.

As, however, that active hand ceased probing, and the man closed his eyes dreamily, Frank was convinced that he was a hypnotist—for he seemed to feel him reading his mind.

"I'll take him," spoke the man, sharply. "Name, please?" challenged the clerk. "Have to keep a record of all transactions."

"John Gillespie."

"All right. And the boy goes to work at what trade?"

The eyes of Frank's employer twinkled a bit. It seemed that he could be merry, with all his grimness.

He poked his fingers in a vest pocket and drew out a sectional sprung clothes-pin.

"See that?" he demanded.

The clerk nodded.

"And that?"

He had placed it squarely across Frank's nose.

"I do, but—"

"That's one of the things this boy will have to do, if he works for me."

"Wear a clothes-pin?" began the clerk, wonderingly.

"Yes. Come on, boy. You hired at six dollars a week."

Frank had not objected when his employer attached the clothes pin—he thought it best to let things drift, and see what came of it.

As, however, he took it off and marched into the street, Frank decided that he was not called on to cater to miscellaneous erratic procedures without an explanation.

"One word, please," he broke in.

"Well?" questioned Gillespie, sharply.

"What—what is your business?"

"Call me a jeweler."

"And you—you were fooling, of course, about that clothes pin?"

"Not a bit of it."

"I don't see—"

The man squared about and looked right down into Frank's eyes.

"Boy," he began, "I like you."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're all right—I have a way of knowing."

"I saw that."

"It's a credit to your shrewdness that you did. I need a boy. A boy of your kind. When we get to my factory—"

"Factory of what?"

"You will see when we arrive. When we get there I shall give you the chance of a lifetime."

"To make money?"

"All you want of it."

"That suits me."

"Stick to me, my boy," continued the alleged jeweler, "and you will wear diamonds' for—"

The man paused impressively. Frank was divided between doubt and wonder.

"Yes, sir," he urged.

"For the business I'm in, and the business I'm going to teach you," resumed Gillespie, seriously, "is to make diamonds."

CHAPTER III.

THE DIAMOND-MAKER.

"You make diamonds!" cried Frank, incredulously, staring at his employer, who from being erratic he decided had now gone suddenly rank, stark crazy.

"I do—or rather I have made diamonds," answered the jeweler, quietly, but with confidence, "and I expect to have you help me make a great many more."

Frank whistled softly, dubiously to himself. Gillespie marched on without another word, and Frank let that statement sift through his wondering mind.

"I see," he cogitated. "He thinks he can make diamonds. Well, every man to his fad, and if this one can afford six dollars a week hiring a helper for his whimsies, I'm not going to waste time convincing him that he's a visionary."

"Here we are," disturbed this soliloquy, and Frank rather disappointedly studied the front of a little one-storied frame structure, with the sign, "Jeweler," on one window and "Repairing Done" on the other.

"Modest quarters," he mused. "Oh, say! sir."

Gillespie had unlocked the door, admitting Frank to a gloomy room.

It contained a shelf of old clocks, a wire hung with watches and a workman's bench full of tools.

Frank had kicked something with his foot that rang and glinted. Picking it up, he found it to be a gold double-eagle.

"Thank you," nodded Gillespie, pocketing it. "As I thought."

"What?" interrogated Frank.

"Strictly honest."

"Me?"

"Just. Wasn't planted particularly for you, but for whatever boy I happened to hire. Placed as a temptation, an experiment. None needed in your case. You couldn't steal a pin. Now, then, take off your coat."

Frank did so.

"Put on these gauze spectacles."

"Yes, sir."

"Clothes-pin—don't wince; you'll need all these precautions."

"Will I, sir?"

"See if you don't."

Frank did see, in a twinkling. His employer opened a door at the rear of the little store, slid another back, pushed a third up, and at the inner threshold of a den of mystery triple-guarded, Frank paused, somewhat dazed.

Here was the real workshop of his guide—an apartment about forty feet square.

Its windows were closely shuttered, and several electric lights were fed by a dynamo which whirred in one corner.

Power was supplied to this by belting running through slits in the wall to some near factory.

There were lathes, grinding machines, a furnace—all the equipment of a model machine shop.

At one side were three doors leading into as many rooms. Gillespie opened the first.

"Look in," suggested he.

Frank saw the utility of the eye-blinds as he peered.

A series of steel grinders were cutting away at some spar-like substance, reducing it to a glassy dust that was blinding.

The jeweler opened a second door. Frank got a whiff of some smarting acid gas proceeding from a deep aluminum trough, and knew that but for the clothes-pin he would probably have been overcome by the fumes.

A third door led into a room where, under the action of a dozen gas jets forced by compressed air to a converging center, some substance was flashing and vaporizing.

"You have seen my plant," remarked Gillespie. "We'll have a little talk now."

He led Frank to a room well shut off from the main factory.

It was provided with all the accessories of home comfort, and Gillespie beckoned to an easy-chair.

"What's your name?" he began.

Frank gave it, and that was a starter to a series of questions, fired in gatling-gun order, until the jeweler seemed to have turned him clear inside out.

"Ha, hum!" commented Gillespie. "Quite a story. I'll make a man of you, if you'll stick to me."

Frank was beginning to warm up to the brisk, cheery oddity, and told him so.

"Think you'd like to try working for me?" interrogated Gillespie.

"Why not, sir?"

"You must have faith in me."

"You mean I must believe you can make diamonds?"

"Believe? You must know it!"

Frank fidgeted.

"Mr. Gillespie," he confessed, bluntly, "I don't honestly think you can."

"Don't?" smiled the jeweler, pityingly.

"No, sir."

"When Bowker, of Paris; Ballenberg, the great Amsterdam lapidary; Haine, of London; Dougall, the famous Brazilian expert, are spending fortunes, are devoting years to experimenting? Boy, I can make you a diamond inside of ten minutes, right before your very eyes."

Frank murmured something about hoping he could.

"It's simple, it's easy as baking a cake. Come with me, I will show you."

The jeweler approached the electric furnace in the middle of the workroom and took up a crucible.

"I place in here," he said, "half a pound of pure iron filings," and he poured a flickering mass from a bottle. "Next, powdered charcoal—that is to sugarize the compound. Now, then, into the furnace they go."

Gillespie turned some levers that connected wires running to the dynamo under the furnace.

"Know how hot that crucible is?" he inquired.

"No, sir," breathed the extravagantly-interested Frank.

"The highest temperature which scientists can measure is thirty-six hundred degrees!"

"Whew!"

"Is fifty times hotter than a sweltering summer's day. In that crucible, however, the heat is beyond the limit of accurate measure. Watch it.

Gillespie turned a switch.

A blinding flash of light filled the room—the apparatus became a hissing, spitting devil's caldron.

With a terrible glare the furnace spat out molten metal-like sparks from a squib. The heat was kept in, or the room would have been unbearable.

"Now," said the jeweler, "the crucible has been in the furnace five minutes. Observe me."

He removed the cover. The caldron hissed more furiously than ever.

"I take out the iron and plunge it in cold water. The outer skin will contract around the central liquid with a pressure of from fifteen to twenty tons to the inch, the liquified carbon will crystallize, and in a fortnight there will be diamonds."

Frank was fascinated. The diamond-maker's enthusiasm was contagious.

"In a fortnight?" he murmured, rather disappointedly.

"Yes. Ah, you are like everybody else! You expect to see the full-grown fruit expand from the seed in an hour. Well, I will show you some diamonds I made by this process last week."

Back to the little room he led Frank, opened a drawer in a table, and pointed to a white piece of cardboard.

"See them?" he queried.

"I see a dozen or two pin-head points," assented Frank, staring his hardest to detect even these.

"Diamonds."

"But they are so small."

"Look through this."

"Oh!" ejaculated Frank, enraptured, as a powerful magnifying-glass was handed him and the specks became mountains.

"Brilliant? pure? grand?" interrogated the jeweler, excitedly. "They are the real thing—they are what I just made in the crucible."

"But—"

"Minute? Unmerchantable? Correct. Still—a step at a time—I can make diamonds. That's settled."

"I now believe you can."

"I can make big diamonds just as well."

"If you only can—"

"Big as walnuts, big as your fist, big as a football!" declared Gillespie, emphatically. "That's why I want a boy. That's why I want you—to help me do it."

"It's a wonderful thing!" breathed Frank, ardently.

"Isn't it? Now, listen. There isn't a scientist in the world, from Professor Crookes down to the humblest college demonstrator, but can do what I have just done. That's mere child's play with a well-known principle; liquify your carbon, compress it and you have diamonds. The trouble is, they materialize in isolated particles, pin-point sparks."

"I think I understand."

"At great expense, to elaborate my plans for overcoming this, I have a powerful dynamo, specially made for the purpose. It weighs four and a half tons, and is driven by a seventy-five horse-power engine in an adjoining factory, generating a current of

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eight hundred amperes at seventy volts and yielding a heat of five thousand degrees. This enables me to be sure that I can melt the iron just right, so that it saturates itself with the carbon."

Frank understood clearly, despite the technical terms employed.

"After that comes the tedious part of the process—attacking the metallic mass with solvents to liberate the diamonds—the crystals of graphite oxide, carbonado and boet. These minute diamonds, I find, burn in the air before the blow-pipe into carbonic acid. Now, I have discovered something: Fix their luster, crystalline form, optical properties, density and hardness, and you have a product identical with the natural stone. How can you do this? By originating some process to solidify the particles. What? A substance. What substance? The missing ingredient."

"Sir?"

"The missing ingredient."

"Is there one?" queried the wonder-lost Frank.

"Certainly."

"Have you found it?"

"I have. You noticed the closed steel cylinders near the furnace?"

"Yes, sir."

"Those powerful devices exert a pressure of ninety-five tons to the square inch. What I propose to do is to aid nature with high artificial pressure, put in my ingredient, and—diamonds, big as you want them!"

"When—where are you going to do all this?" fluttered Frank, worked up to great suspense and curiosity.

"To-morrow evening."

"And I shall see you?"

"That's what you're here for, is it not?"

"And I shall help you?"

"Very greatly."

"And—and—"

"You shall share in some of the glory and profit. Frank, according to the bumps on that smart, honest head of yours, you're going to amount to something in the world."

"Oh, thank you, sir!"

"And I'm going to help you. Now, then, five o'clock. I call that quitting time."

Mr. Gillespie went out into the workroom and shut off the machinery.

Then he returned to prepare a meal. Frank fancied he had never enjoyed one better.

Not another word would the jeweler say about diamond-making. As if his mind needed a rest from the subject, he talked about everything else.

About eight o'clock he brought in an iron mortar and pestal.

"There's your work for the morning," he said, and something rattled into the receptacle.

"Why, they're diamonds!" cried Frank.

"Real ones—couple of hundred dollars' worth."

"Did you make them?"

"No. I bought those."

"And I—"

"You are to pulverize them."

"You mean—"

"Pound them to powder."

"Why! Mr. Gillespie!"

"I need the dust in an experiment. Costly? Perhaps," smiled the jeweler, "but I know what I'm about, Frank. Now, then, go out and take a brisk walk. The fresh air will clear your head for pleasant fairy dreams, preparatory to practical hard work in the morning."

"It's like fairyland itself!" murmured Frank, as he left the place, and in a retrospective dream of all the fascinating things the jeweler had done, walked on and on.

Frank had turned a corner, calculating a short cut for home, when he became conscious of hurried footsteps behind him.

Three men as many feet apart were closing in on him, while a cab came slowly toward the curb, as one of them whistled slightly.

Their actions were peculiar, suspicious, Frank fancied, as the foremost man caught his arm.

"What's your name, youngster?" he interrogated.

"What's that to you?" demanded Frank, pulling away; "but it's Frank."

The second man jumped directly in front of him.

"Frank what?" he projected, eagerly.

"Warren."

"It's him!" called the third, joining the group. "In with him!"

"Stop!" cried Frank.

The trio pounced on him. One grabbed his arms, a second his feet, the third member of the party tore open the door of the carriage, which had come to a stop.

Into it, alarmed and struggling, Frank was landed with a violent shock.

CHAPTER IV.

KIDNAPED!

Frank felt his head spin as it struck the opposite carriage door. The vehicle rocked as his three captors sprang into it after him.

"Hold on—" he began.

"Drive on!" interrupted a gruff voice.

Its owner jerked Frank erect and jammed him to the seat opposite.

"Look here—"

"Squelch him!"

The man beside Frank slapped his great rough hand across his lips like a padlock.

Frank sat quivering with uncertainty and excitement. Then he started as he recognized one of the men—it was Belton, the ex-clerk, whom he had chased in the garden of the Warren mansion the night previous.

"Oh, I see!" he muttered, and he fancied he did.

He had, further, evidently seen too much to suit Mr. Fred Warren's ideas, and that individual was taking steps to prevent him from seeing any more lawyers, from making public his suspicions.

Wherever the carriage was bound for, prompt dispatch seemed the order of the night.

Within ten minutes they had crossed the city. Houses grew less frequent, the carriage drove into the darkness of a lonely country road.

The man at Frank's side thought it safe to remove the gagging hand now.

"Quiet it is, mate, or I'll run my fist down your throat next!" he warned.

"Oh, there's no need of that," insisted Frank. "I can guess out the situation."

"Do tell, now!" jeered the man.

Frank fixed his eyes on Belton. The latter wriggled and evaded the indignant, accusing inspection.

"Yes," continued Frank, bluntly, "you are kidnaping me."

"Well, sort of snuffing you out, temporarily, jist!" chuckled the man.

"I can guess who put you up to this, Belton," spoke Frank, boldly.

"Hist! Ha! P'st!" exclaimed the ex-clerk, with a nervous start. "Muzzle the boy! No names! I'm not safe around Los Angeles."

"Will you be any safer after this outrage?" demanded Frank. "See here, Belton, Fred Warren has hired you to do this. The estate belongs to me rightfully, and you know it. Come on my side, prove that an A was changed to an X in Mr. Warren's will, and you'll find me a liberal friend."

Weak-minded Belton looked half convinced, and trembled hesitatingly.

"No, you don't!" flared out one of his associates. "Shut up, youngster—brace up, Belton. We're paid to ship this young fellow, and there's no backing out. Honor among—"

"Thieves!" insinuated Frank, hotly.

"No, gentlemen—and that's the way such pays insults!" thundered the speaker, wrathfully.

He gave Frank a cruel slap directly across the face. All the fight in Frank's nature flared to the surface.

Fire to the core, pluck to the core, he was on his assailant in a trice.

If Belton and the other man had not dragged him away the astounded "gentleman" would have worn two black eyes instead of one.

"You young wildcat!" he panted. "Wait till we get you on shipboard—"

"Eh?" projected Frank.

"Oho! didn't expect that lay?"

"You never dare—"

"It's the coast, and a waiting cocoanut cruiser takes you swift and secret to a South Sea island. Chase butterflies for a year or two, for short of that you won't find yourself back on California soil."

"Won't I?" flared Frank, but his heart sank as he realized that these men were intent on shipping him out of the country.

Two years! By that time Fred Warren would have dissipated the fortune rightfully his own.

Two years! And in two days John Gillespie would probably have demonstrated his ability to make diamonds big as footballs, and he, Frank, would miss the glorious chance of helping him do it!

It was this thought more than any other that stirred and nerved Frank.

The jeweler's experiments had set his ardor at fever heat. He was like a person vouchsafed a tantalizing glimpse of fairyland, and eager for a further enlightening experience.

"I must get free!" he whispered tumultuously to himself, "but how? how?"

The man at Frank's side was telling a joke now, and a bottle was passing. The trio was off guard momentarily.

Frank longed for a weapon, a missile. He could not reach his pocket-knife without attracting attention.

Suddenly his eyes snapped. He had found and placed on the inside lapel of his coat that afternoon a brass pin larger than a darning needle.

Frank drew it free, closed forefinger and thumb about its knobbed head, got his other hand ready to snatch at the door-catch, and—acted.

"Murder!"

"Waiow!"

"Stop him!"

"Free!"

Thus the man next to Frank, jabbed in knee, the one opposite

prodded bone-deep in the forearm, Belton suspending the tipped rum bottle, and Frank as he snapped the door catch tumbled promiscuously outward, landed on all fours, struggled to his feet and dashed away like the wind.

"A sharp "Whoa!" halted the vehicle, there was a patter and whirl of excited voices, and occupants and driver, whip in hand, were in hot pursuit.

Darkness favored Frank. He had started across the stubby, rolling field. Half a mile over it rose some stunted trees. That was the point Frank determined to make for.

All kinds of direful threats pursued him—yells, the clicking of a weapon, the crack of the driver's whip, but unheeding these, Frank gained steadily.

"It's dead easy," he jubilated. "I've as good as slipped them already."

Cricketty-crack!

Halfway across the field Frank's foot struck something that snapped. It seemed as if his ankle bone snapped in unison.

He went flat, the breath nearly knocked out of him.

"What is it?" he panted, glaring.

A wooden stake driven in the ground had caught his foot, and this he had broken nearly in two.

From it ran a rope that strained quiveringly, and from its end Frank saw an animal arise, startled.

"It's a cow!" he declared. "It's tethered here, and—ah! sick, or a fancy breed, for it's overcoated."

He could make out that the animal wore one of those baggy canvas coverings often used on fancy stock farms to keep troublesome insects at bay.

"I must make up for lost time," he soliloquized. "Too bad! That was a knock!"

He tried to run, and limped instead. He looked at the distant trees—they were dreadfully far away for a disabled runner. He glanced back—his enemies were coming forward rapidly.

"No use!" he faltered. "I'm caught. Co, boss!"

The animal came slowly up to the spot where Frank had sank, and sniffed at him.

"I see him!" Frank heard a distant but approaching shout.

It was the cow the pursuing speaker saw, but he soon would see Frank, the latter admitted with a groan of despair.

That groan, however, was instantly followed by an ejaculation of more stimulating import.

A whimsical idea had suggested itself to Frank's mind, but it was the forlorn hope of a desperate situation.

The cow was now placidly grazing, and Frank noticed that its overcoat was many sizes too large for it.

Strapped at the ends there was a vacant space along the side into which two such boys could have squeezed, if necessary.

"They're coming!" murmured Frank. "Co, boss! co, boss! I've made it! Will they guess it?"

Frank tugged at the front end of the canvas covering. He inserted his feet, he pushed himself along. A movement of the animal slapped to taut the edge of the covering as he drew in his head. Then it gaped enough for him to peer out.

Frank lay snugly as in a spread sailcloth, but he had his doubts of the bulge he made escaping notice. The only point in his favor was that his late captors were approaching the animal from its other side.

"We've run him down!" rang out an excited voice.

"Pshaw! it's a cow!"

"What? So it is."

Frank heard the four men arrive, one by one. Their comments ran the gamut of surprise, disgust and mystification.

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"He isn't here. Where is he, then?" demanded Belton. "I'll take my oath he isn't off the prairie."

"That dratted cow fooled the life out of me!" and there was a sharp crack of the whip.

Frank got a severe jolt. With a snort the cow kicked up its heels, frightened by the whip cut.

It started on a run, a jerk parting the half-broken stake.

Frank was delighted. While his pursuers were nosing around in all other directions, his strange steed was making for a rise a quarter of a mile away.

Up to the rise and up the rise the cow proceeded. Here a shrill shriek startled it anew—the toot of a locomotive.

"That's pretty near," commented Frank. "Hello! Here! This won't do. My goodness!"

He wriggled and struggled, but the cow tilted him back from getting out as it ascended a gravel slant.

There was that piercing signal once more. Frank grew frightened, for the cow's hoofs clattered over the ballast of a railroad track.

"It's running right into an advancing train!" cried Frank. "Yes, this is the out-track. I see the glare. Oh, bother!"

He had opened his pocket-knife. It was no easy task getting out at the point he had crept into the canvas overcoat, and Frank had started to rip it from end to end.

Three inches cut, the front hoofs of the animal struck a side rail, a switch, a tie clamp—Frank knew not what, but it stumbled to its knees.

The shock drove the knife out of his hand through the small gap he had made. The animal backed frantically.

Toot-toot!

Frank's hair rose on the top of his head.

To-ooo-ooot!

Appallingly near came the warning signal.

As if dazed, trembling all over, the cow halted, rooted in dumb helplessness.

Frank strained at the slight gap he had made in the canvas to enlarge it.

The material was strong as leather. He scuffed and clawed to get out the way he had got in.

One arm out, his head following, Frank paused, paralyzed with horror.

Not thirty feet away, flashing down the rails in the middle of which he was planted at full speed came a locomotive.

Its headlight glare seemed to bore into his very brain.

"Gone up!" voiced Frank Warren, weakly.

Crash!

CHAPTER V.

THE MISSING INGREDIENT.

"Stop! stop!" screamed Frank Warren.

The cry was a frantic, involuntary appeal of desperation.

It was like the pleading of a helpless pygmy to an onrushing giant of destruction.

Wobbling, glaring, terrible, that fierce, scathing headlight eye of the great locomotive came down upon the beleaguered boy.

Clang—crash—quiver!

Frank closed his eyes. Escape was impossible!

He was naturally brave, heroically faced danger with the dauntless vim of a true, plucky California boy, but this was annihilation!

A sweep of furious air took his breath away—the scorch of hissing steam accompanied by a cutting hail of driving gravel crossed face and hands.

The cow wavered and bent in a terrific suction, and then—the cyclone of crash, clatter and confusion passed by.

"Never hit!"

Frank screwed his head to look back, Frank thrilled warm where he had streaked cold.

Had some imaginary, some magic, some phantom railroad train passed over him, under him?—for by him it had certainly gone.

No, the train was real—he could mark it rocking to a stop two hundred yards beyond him.

Brakes off—reverse—toot—toot—swish—swish!—it backed toward him, and then Frank discerned an enlightening fact; the train was on the other track.

He feared that the cow might take a notion to get in its path again, and he scrambled and tore his way out of the canvas covering.

Trembling, and drenched with perspiration from his vivid exertion, Frank stood starling statue-like as the rear car neared him slowly.

The brakeman, lantern in hand, preceded it. He signaled a halt as he came upon Frank.

"A boy!" he muttered, dubiously, and Frank nodded, and stared harder.

"Pretty near neither!" observed Frank.

"Who turned the switch?"

"Was it turned?"

"Of course it was—what else sent us on the other track?"

"Oh, say!"

Frank found the key to the situation in a flash. He shivered as he realized how narrow was the graze of destruction.

He tumbled words over one another, rapid avalanche fashion told briefly of his predicament, and concluded:

"When the cow stumbled, its hoofs must have slid the switch bar or the rail. If it hadn't backed—oh! I was sure the train was upon us."

The conductor came up at this point, then several passengers, and heads were protruded from car windows all along the train.

Frank had to explain several times that he had got into the canvas cow covering to evade capture at the hands of enemies.

"It sounds like a fairy story," growled the conductor, "but the boy looks straight. Drive that fool cow down the embankment."

The animal, greeted with a sharp slap, disappeared with a kick of the hoofs.

"Going to the city?" asked the conductor of Frank.

"I'd like to."

"Get on, then. I want you to satisfy the train dispatcher that it isn't our fault that we are late."

"It seems like a dream!" breathed Frank, with a vast sigh of relief and satisfaction, as, the train starting right once more, from the rear coach platform he observed no trace of pursuers.

He made haste, when Los Angeles was reached, to repeat his story to a wondering official at the depot, and start for Mr. Gillespie's workshop.

Frank had to knock vigorously to get in, for his employer had locked up long since, giving up for the night.

"A bad beginning, young man," he remarked, rather severely.

"A mighty good ending, I call it," dissented Frank, cheerily. "Don't scold, Mr. Gillespie. I've not been skylarking. Give me a chance to explain."

"Scold? I'm an old bear! Skylarking? Those villains!" flared out the indignant and excited diamond-maker, when Frank had told his story. "I declare, this is worse than an act of the dark ages. We'll have no more of this!"

"No, I shall not go out on the streets again without a police-

man's whistle in one hand, a fifty-two caliber in the other!" joked Frank.

"You shall go where you like, when you like! You shall defy those scoundrels! You shall hunt down the last one of them!" declared the jeweler, vehemently. "My boy, I'm a busy man, but—wait a day or two!"

"Till the grand experiment is over?"

"Exactly. Then I'll settle the hash of that murderous crowd, believe me! I'll get you your rights. Meantime——"

"Yes, sir?"

"You go to sleep. I've a plan to think over."

Frank noted the last time he closed his tired eyes that Gillespie was gently waving a sponge in front of his face.

"What—doing—Mr. Gillespie?" he murmured, dreamily.

"Go to sleep, Frank. I'm only trying a little experiment that won't hurt you in the least."

Frank knew what that experiment was when he woke up.

Gillespie was waiting for him to come out of a dreamless sleep, and held a small mirror before him, first thing.

"Look, Frank," he directed.

"Say!"

Frank jerked half erect on the couch with a startled cry.

"Think your mother would know you?"

"My goodness!"

"Actually scared, aren't you?" smiled the jeweler.

"I'm—I'm—oh, Mr. Gillespie, change me back! It don't seem natural."

Frank stared at his own reflection in the looking-glass, and well he might.

He understood now that, putting him under the influence of some powerful but harmless anaesthetic, Mr. Gillespie had given him a completely new identity.

"Acid mask—I left it on all night," explained the diamond-maker. "How do you like the rich Mexican shade of complexion? Hair a gorgeous bleach—I could make my fortune with my new dyeing cap, I think. That touch on the eyebrows completes the transition. Do you think that Warren crowd of sinners would recognize you now?"

"Oh, I know they wouldn't!" declared Frank, "but when I want to get back to the old Frank Warren——"

"I'll fix it, trust me," promised Gillespie, confidently. "I can remove in a night what I produce in a night."

It took Frank an hour or two to get used to the fact that he was most effectively "disguised." After breakfast his mind was promptly drifted into new channels of interest.

Gillespie put on asbestos gloves and a huge leather apron, equipped Frank similarly, closely locked all outside doors and shutters, and set the dynamo in motion.

Frank helped in adjusting the furnace, clean the crucibles, pulverize diamonds, mix liquids.

At noon the jeweler announced that a mixture he had in a cold crucible was ready to experiment with.

"We will rest a couple of hours, Frank," he said. "You see what I have done—heated the diamond dust red-hot, dropped it into liquid oxygen, and the mass sank without igniting. You have seen, too, that a mass diamond, heated extremely with the blow-pipe, caught fire on touching the liquefied gas, and burned steadily on the surface of the oxygen, becoming opaque from the carbon dioxide produced, just as graphite will. This settles a theory. An artificially-produced diamond has been made time and again."

"Big?"

"As a pea, yes. I can do that. The trouble is, that they explode."

"Do they, now?"

"Yes. I expect to make a diamond of fair size this afternoon on account of the superior pressure facilities I possess."

"Then we have the great secret safe!"

"No more than Crookes, or Dewar, or Hung. They can do the same—have done the same—but in every instance the stone, after being exposed to the air, blew to atoms."

"Can you prevent that?"

"I hope to."

"With the discovery you spoke about?"

"Yes, the missing ingredient."

Frank was consumed with curiosity to ask what this wonderful material or compound might be, but did not like to.

"You have seen the spar-like piece I have been reducing to a fine powder in the steel grinders?" went on the jeweler.

"Yes, sir."

"It is finest dust, impalpable essence I have caught in a funnel—that is the missing ingredient. Let me show it to you. Careful, Frank! A breath, a jar would dissipate it, so delicate is it, so little is there of it. Look."

Gillespie removed a cloth from an object on the table.

An upturned glass was revealed resting on a sheet of white paper.

Upon this was a minute heap, an infinitesimal pile of the finest possible powder.

"That is the missing ingredient?" murmured Frank.

"It is. When I produce the diamond, at once, the second I have separated it from its coating and slip it into the flame of the blow-pipe—that instant you are to tip the powder over diamond and flame."

"And then——"

"It will fix the diamond, it will solidify it, there will be no explosion, and we are—rich!"

"And famous!" fluttered Frank. "What a discovery—what a wonderful thing to find out!"

Frank sat lost in a brilliant dream of the gorgeous possibilities attending success. The jeweler was lost, too, in profound thought as they lingered at the table after dinner.

Somehow, to Frank's mind, however, Gillespie seemed rather anxious than enthusiastic, and Frank looked somewhat questioningly at him, as with a sigh he arose, went over to his writing desk and was busy there for over an hour.

The jeweler's face was still more serious as he arose from his task.

He had written three letters, and placed them in unsealed envelopes.

"Read those addresses, Frank," he said.

Very curiously Frank did so.

"Franz Joseph Batterman, Amsterdam," read Frank first.

"The greatest living lapidary in the world," explained Gillespie.

"Dom Pedro Velasquez, Rio Janeiro," continued Frank, scanning the second envelope.

"The expert diamond authority of Brazil," commented the jeweler.

"Farley Powell, New York," read Frank from the third and last envelope.

"Professional gem collector for the Queen of England, the Shah of Persia and the Turkish royalty," announced Gillespie. "See, further."

He took out the three letters, and fluttered them constantly so that Frank could not see what was written upon them, but he could discern a single bit of writing in the corner of each sheet.

"That little postscript, call it," continued Gillespie, "is a word

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divided into three parts—one syllable to each letter. One syllable for the Amsterdam letter, one for the Rio Janeiro letter, and one for the New York letter."

He now sealed the respective inclosures and handed the letters, stamped, to Frank.

"Put them in your pocket," directed the jeweler.

Frank did so, on the keenest edge of suspense and mystification.

"Those three men," pursued Gillespie, "are warm personal scientific friends of mine. I feel a presentiment—no, I will say that, for I am not a superstitious man—rather, I wish to provide for contingencies."

"As how, Mr. Gillespie?" ventured Frank.

"My calling is a precarious one—fraught with peril amid dangerous acids and chemicals. If anything should happen to me, I would certainly wish to bequeath my great secret to some active congenial spirit. I consider these three men worthy of the trust."

"Then why do you give each only one-third of the secret—a portion only, I suppose, of the name of your wonderful missing ingredient?"

"Exactly. Because all men are human, and, in justice, I do not wish to offer any one of them the temptation of trying to get ahead of the other. I have written each one of them what I have done. In order that the secret be effective, the three must get together, put the three syllables together. You are to keep possessions of those letters. In case only that anything serious happens to me—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Mail them."

"I understand."

"Further," and the kindly hand of the jeweler rested on the shoulder of the serious-faced Frank, "you will find a letter in that desk addressed to yourself. That you will present to Batterman, to Velasquez and to Powell, when they meet."

"But how am I to know where they meet?" asked the wondering Frank.

"You will find a second letter in the desk which you are to send to Mr. Powell in New York City with the others. That will be sufficient. He is instructed to see that you have a full share in the working out of the experiment and its profits."

Frank's face lit up with brightest sunshine, less from the prospect of gain than from a realization of the considerate thoughtfulness of his employer.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Gillespie!" he fluttered with genuine emotion, "but nothing is going to happen to you."

"I hope not, I think not, but the wise man takes all due precaution; and now, my boy, to work. Before sundown we must prove to the world that we can make diamonds!"

With a brisk step the jeweler led the way to the workroom.

Frank was becoming used to his methods and the various mechanism he employed, and helped him promptly and intelligently in the first steps of preparation for the great test.

When its final stages approached, however, he was so anxious, so eager, so excited, that he could do little but stare, and hope and thrill.

The crucible was put into the furnace, the levers placed, the powerful dynamo sent forward a blazing, flaring supply of flame.

The crucible boiled, hissed, bubbled, spit out molten sparks.

"Three thousand, four thousand, five thousand degrees of heat," murmured the excited Gillespie. "Get the powder ready, Frank."

"Yes, sir."

With trembling hands Frank lifted the sheet of paper containing the precious missing ingredient, ready to funnel and pour the instant the critical stage was reached.

Hiss—ss—ss!

Out of the crucible flew the mass of liquid fire, into the aluminum water trough it was plunged.

Then with a pair of platinum-pointed pincers the jeweler removed a ragged black mass looking like a cinder.

Once, twice, a dozen times he bathed it in a chemical vat.

There was a scaling, cracking sound—the refuse shell fell away entirely.

"Glory!" voiced the overwrought Frank, in a wild gasp of uncontrollable agitation.

"A diamond!" shouted the enraptured Gillespie.

It glinted, burned, dazzled at the ends of the pincers. The jeweler hastened to place it in the flame of the blow-pipe.

"Quick, quick, lad!" he ordered, his voice husky with excitement—"the powder!"

"The missing ingredient!" whispered the awed Frank. "It is ready."

"Apply!" rang out Gillespie's voice.

Frank lifted the paper. His heart was beating like a trip-hammer.

Despite himself he could not repress a great relieving gasp.

Puff!

Alas! Precious as jewel dust, light as refined swansdown, one breath, one jar sent the little heap of powder, not on the diamond, to fix its intensity and successfully end a wonderful test, but into the air promiscuously, dissipated, lost.

"Take care!" shouted Gillespie, suddenly, warningly.

Overcome with his disaster, Frank stood rooted in dismay to the spot.

Pop!

The diamond had burst!

He seemed to see such winged, flying sparks of prismatic luminosity as boy had never seen before.

He heard some hurling particle strike a thin vessel of chemicals on a shelf nearby.

It broke. With a roar it sprang into flame.

Glare, crash and glitter filled the air.

Frank caught a last sight of Gillespie, surrounded by a halo of brilliant flame, amid a jar that vibrated as if earth and sky had come together.

The center of a million darting sparks of fire—of a million crashing echoes—Frank Warren was borne off his feet as by a rushing cyclone.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW CLEW.

"We can't let you in here again."

"But I've nowhere else to go."

"Find a place."

"And I'm tired."

"Lazy trait, that, in boys."

"And hungry."

"You can buy a cartload of fruit from a Chinaman for five cents."

"But I haven't got the five cents."

Slam!

The violent shutting of the door of the city hospital ended the colloquy, and Frank Warren, principal speaker in the same, turned down the steps dejectedly.

To him the grand crash that had sent up the jeweler's hopes and all the jeweler's possessions seemed to have occurred but yesterday.

In reality, instead, it happened two months since—a vague, hazy splotch in his memory.

In a very few words Frank could summarize all that had been told to him. All that he had learned since being discharged as cured from the hospital that morning.

The bursting of the test diamond in Gillespie's workroom had broken a bottle containing some high explosive.

This had communicated to other chemicals, wreaking destruction, annihilation on every hand.

Frank had been blown through a window. That had saved his life. As to the jeweler, he had not been seen since, and it was supposed that he had perished in the fire.

Since then Frank had hovered between life and death at the hospital, whither he had been removed. They had turned him out as "cured" that morning.

"Cured," in the sense of being salted with salves and peppered with medicines, Frank certainly was, but he was a pretty dreary-looking wreck, as he turned his back for the second time that day on the great infirmary.

He had wandered wearily, weakly about that morning, to find the Warren mansion shut up. Fred Warren, with a set of dissolute companions, had gone down to "do" the fiesta, or feast of roses, at Santa Barbara.

Frank gave Gillespie up as lost. He had doubtlessly been incinerated in the terrible fire that had even burned bricks to ashes with the fervent-fed heat of high combustibles.

The three letters that the jeweler had given Frank to mail, Frank learned with wonder had been mailed a week after the explosion.

A hospital nurse had found them in his pocket, had seen they were properly stamped and directed, and had slipped them into a letter-box.

Frank felt like a person cheated out of something. John Gillespie intended that he should benefit if the secret ever went to Batterman, to Velasquez or to Powell.

But what claim could Frank make on them? The letter Mr. Gillespie had written to Powell, recommending Frank to his interest, the fire had destroyed.

As to going to New York, to Rio Janeiro, to Amsterdam, in search of the collector, the expert or the lapidary, that was out of the question.

"I give it all up as a dream too fair to last," Frank sighfully told himself. "From the glare of the diamond down to the plain, common hustling of grubbing—that's the programme, and I may just as well accept it and get to work."

But Frank found himself unable to work. He was weak, discouraged, bewildered. He passed old-time friends on the street who never even gave him a look of recognition, and that cut him worst of all.

And then it suddenly occurred to Frank that he was "disguised!" He looked into a show-window mirror.

Hair bleached, face brown as a berry, eyebrows changed—only that he was woefully thinner, Frank was the same transformed individual Gillespie had made of him the first night at the workshop.

"He said he could bring back to the hair its original color, remove the face stain, restore the natural eyebrows in a night," recollect Frank; "but, say! he's dead, and—and suppose nobody else can?"

That was a worrying fact, and Frank mooded over it. Fate was robbing him all around—of his rightful fortune, of a grand scientific triumph at the very threshold of success, and now of his very identity!

He had returned to the hospital to ask for another night's shelter, till he got used to thinness, weakness and a lonely feeling

generally, but he was marked "cured" on the books, and that settled it.

"I've either got to fall down some areaway and break a leg to get back into the hospital, or find some other place to bunk in," decided Frank. "Come, now!" he cheered himself. "No need of being blue. I'll look at things different when I get a good meal down me."

Frank did. A man asked him to watch his restless team at the curb and gave him a dime. This invested in a modest but wholesome meal, and dusk coming on, Frank's next solicitude was for sleeping quarters.

He found them finally. Behind a large dry goods store was a lot piled high with empty packing cases. The air was balmy, the place clean.

Frank found some bale wrappings, and soon had a pillow and covering, lying in the bottom of a deep, narrow box, and studying the stars just long enough to get good and sleepy.

He was disturbed some time after midnight by the sound of human voices near at hand and the smell of rank tobacco smoke.

"Some one else bunking here," he reflected, and peered through a crack in the box.

Two frowsy fellows were draining a beer bottle and smoking, directly at the side of the packing case Frank was in.

"Aw! it's a fairy story you're giving me, Dan!" one of them was saying.

"Not a bit of it, not a bit of it!" came the emphatic reply.

"Free beds?"

"As air."

"Big veranda to sit on, large as life, and no one to say nay!"

"In armchairs worth twenty dollars apiece."

"Marble fireplaces—chandeliers?"

"Moquet carpets and quarter-sawed oak staircases, yes."

"Where is this—this fairy palace, Dan?"

"It's no palace—it's simply a big hotel. Fellow built it, furnished it last month. No one came. He just abandoned it—bankrupt. The creditors are Eastern capitalists. They haven't got on to the state of affairs yet."

"And meantime?"

"Meantime, along comes Roving Jerry. He don't do a thing but send out word. In two days the crowd of wanderers began to arrive—the halt, the lame, the blind. Say! to see those lodging-house regulars sitting in front of a six-hundred-dollar fireplace, in bric-à-brac chairs, sleeping in brass beds fit for nabobs, lining that veranda, like tourists—well, they've took possession. They're running that hotel."

"Dan, where is it?"

"You know Piedmont?"

"Yes."

"And Warwick? Between the two, it's up in the mountains. It'll be a cozy nest for a few weeks. It's called La Grande."

"Grub?"

"Lots of it. Why, they've elected a mayor and a police force."

"Well!"

"The police force does night duty only—goes out and arrests stray chickens and dangerous animals—they roast them whole."

"Why didn't you stay?"

"I'm due on a tramp with a pardner in San Francisco. I steered another fellow down to La Grande. Say, Dan! the time we had on the way! He was fixed, and he'd laid in a stock of liquors, I tell you! Smart kind of fellow, too. His name was Belton. Had been quite a lawyer in Los Angeles once, he let out, when over the bay."

Medicine had failed to restore Frank Warren's former strength

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up to the time of retiring that night, but now he sat up with a start as vigorous as though he had been given a powerful cordial.

"Belton!" he breathed simply.

Six hours previous he had decided that life had very few attractions and prospects for him.

Like a suddenly-fired train of gunpowder, however, brain, energy and ambition sprang into vivid flame.

He was poor, homeless, friendless—without a purpose in life.

In the light of what a confession from this man Belton might do for him, Frank discerned a mansion, position, the free means to help unfortunates like himself.

The two vagrants smoked down into a state of somnolence finally.

Frank got out of his box noiselessly, left the yard, walked to the nearest hotel, and joggled a pretty good geographical knowledge with the inspection of a map.

He located Piedmont and he located Warwick, and he guessed about where the tramps' hotel, La Grande, would be.

"A definite task," he murmured. "I'm to get there. Got there, I'm to find Belton. Finding Belton, I'm to bribe, coax, force him to tell me who changed the A to an X in old Felix Warren's will. Then—I'm rich! Well, I like that, but—I got such a taste of the marvelous, of the wonderful diamond making with that poor, dear old genius, Mr. Gillespie, that I don't think I'll ever be contented again."

Frank put his finger definitely on the map where his point of destination lay.

Penniless, half sick, poorly clothed—the two hundred mile tramp was no mean undertaking.

But he saw Belton at the end of the rigorous jaunt, and that spurred him up to undaunted courage and endeavor.

Frank did not see diamonds and diamond making there also—but they were there, all the same.

Frank Warren was bound, unknowingly, on a journey the result of which was to make the Warren fortune seem mean and obscure, that was destined to put him in line with the most brilliant, dazzling, Aladdin-like opulence and splendor of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER VII.

DOWN.

"Found!"

It was a low but intense cry of exultation, and Frank Warren waved his arm till its ragged sleeve fluttered in the breeze.

His position was a peculiarly heroic one—a lone figure on an apex, a statue silhouetted on the central roof of the La Grande Hotel, near Piedmont.

Looking north, he could fancy the two hundred mile tramp could recall eight days of lonely, wearisome toiling, with no help but a stick, no weapon save a stone.

La Grande Hotel, a model palace, had, indeed, been rejected by the public, abandoned by its projector, taken complete possession of by Roving Jerry and his unseemly crew.

Frank fancied paradise invaded by ghouls as he came upon the beautiful grounds, the marble-tiled promenade, the splendid verandas, to find tramps everywhere.

They splashed their feet in the lovely fountains, they decorated their greasy coat lapels with exotics worth a dollar apiece—their great hob nails carelessly scratched the polished ebony pillars, the satin-wood desk panels.

A roaming horde they followed the dictation completely of a horrible old fellow who sat in a kind of drunken state in the

ladies' parlor, and affected to enter all newcomers in the hotel register.

Frank got to the place at noon. He was so fagged out that he slunk unnoticed up the grand staircase, past a group of fellows who were having a chicken fight in the State chamber, and entered the first empty room he came to.

It was dusk when he awoke. His last waking thought had been of Belton—his first waking thought was of Belton.

For, chewing the last hard crust his pocket contained, Frank had started, as three men passed the open door of the room, and a voice met his ear like the command of a powerful influence calling him to action.

"My man—Belton!" he said simply, fluttered with excitement for a minute, braced up magically, and promptly pursued the trio.

The way they went, the distance they went, their furtive colloquies, low-toned and mysterious, indicated from the start that they were bent on some mission of secrecy.

Clear up to the top floor they proceeded, entered a room, lit a candle, and Frank lingered in the hall outside.

"Now, then, partner!" he heard a voice speak.

"Now, then, it is," answered Belton. "We're alone enough here, only take a look around the floor—some prowler might be about."

One of the trio came so promptly out into the hall at this that Frank had no time to get back to the stairway.

He followed a first impulse, and it directed him to grab at the knob of the first door at hand.

"Here's luck!" he breathed, for he had penetrated a little hall, and from it ran stairs to a trapdoor in the roof.

Frank just got this open when the investigating tramp looked carelessly at the stairs, closed the door again, and resumed his tour of investigation.

"I wonder who Belton's new friends are?" murmured Frank, striding the trap casing. "I wonder what they're up to. A secret confab is on. Why, I declare! I can hear perfectly."

In no little surprise Frank cautiously descended a step at a time as voices floated up to him.

Nearer they came, and nearer grew a faint gleam of light, and then Frank's eyes snapped, as halfway down the stairs he came to a little ventilating window set directly in the stair hallway.

It looked into the very room where the candle and the three men were. Two of them sat on a bed—Belton stood facing them.

"Brisk is the word!" he was saying.

"Cash is the word," corrected one of his two companions emphatically.

"Then I'm the man for your prospects," announced Belton. "Gentlemen, I'm tired of being poor, so are you. We have the chance of a lifetime. Did you get the horse and wagon, Bowen?"

"If the farmer we snooked it from isn't on its track, it's waiting back in the hotel stables," answered the man addressed.

"Good!" chuckled Belton. "Now, then, all we've got to do is to drive where I direct, is to do what I direct, after getting to a certain place."

"And what, then?" asked the other two in a voice.

"Three men camping."

"Far?"

"Twenty miles away. I spotted them yesterday. They're looking for something—some peculiar mineral stone. I heard them talking. I know their plans. We wait till they go to sleep. See?" grinned Belton. "I dose them—sleep-powder right here in my pocket. We take their traps. That's the first rake-off."

"And the second?"

"You know who is up in the mountains?"

"Sierra Tom?"

"Exactly. He don't dare to come down, but he and his crowd are ready for company."

"Ah! he takes care of these gentlemen for us?"

"That's the ticket."

"And sells them their liberty later?"

"For a handsome penny, I can tell you! and divides with us."

"Can they pay it?"

"Can they? Say!" cried Belton, getting enthused and excited at once. "Look here—they're togged out like nabobs. They're notables. That's it, notables, with a bank account worth scanning."

Frank's face had grown very serious. He had found Belton, but Belton in league with two fellows desperate as himself—he had found them in the midst of a new scheme of crime, and it began to dawn upon him that he would have a far more hardy villain to fight than he had calculated.

But if Frank was a trifle depressed at what had already been spoken, Belton's next words fairly took him off his feet.

"Gentlemen," continued Belton, "you're my kind, I can see it in your eyes, I can trace it in the way you hustled to get that wagon, in the faith you put in it. This first game I've opened up to you is a mere flash in the pan."

"Aha!"

"An appetizer, a bagatelle! Gentlemen, I'm on the track of something that will make work a memory, luxury cheap as dirt, money knee-deep all along our path of life."

"You're joking!"

"Am I?" cried Belton. "What would you say—hold your breath, now!—what would you say, if I told you that I'm on the track of—on the track? No!—that I've got in reach, fairly grabbed, the secret of making diamonds!"

Frank Warren fell down the stairs.

There are moments when amazement stuns the nerves—Frank experienced one of them.

In stupefaction and alarm, electrified, struck dumb with wonder, past, present and future all in a jumble in which diamonds, diamonds—diamonds once more dazzled and dazzled—he was overwrought, overcome.

"What's that!"

He heard Belton's voice sound out like a pistol shot. Quick, heavy footsteps followed.

"I must pull myself together, or I'm lost!" gasped Frank. "He's found—Belton has found—a way—to make—diamonds!"

A way to gain the roof Frank sought to find, as he struggled with this astounding revelation.

It was a mighty one—it opened up all kinds of speculations, anxieties, hopes.

He rolled over the edge of the trap and shut it close. Then he lay still—wondering.

Yes, he had done a decidedly wise thing in following Belton, not only was he the man who could unravel the mystery of the Warren will, but according to the astounding statement he had just made, he was on the track of the fascinating secret that Frank had mourned as forever drifted out of his life—the glowingly grand power of creating the prismatic spark that rules the universe.

"My scheme, our scheme—poor old John Gillespie's scheme for making diamonds?" fluttered Frank. "Hardly. How could this fugitive refugee get track of that? Oh, I must keep close to this man—there is a double interest in doing so now!"

Frank got up and returned to the trap, eager to return below to his former point of espionage and drink in new disclosures.

"Locked down!"

In surprise he regarded the trapdoor, tried it, tugged, looked

dismayed, and discerned that, whether the conspirators suspected a prowler aloft or not, they had prudently secured it on the inside.

It took Frank two minutes to discover that all the battering in the world would be futile to open up a way below, unless he had a tool or missile to aid him.

He wandered over the roof, to find nothing larger than gravel. There was no other opening leading from it.

He came to a skylight window and looked down.

"Here's a way," he began, shuddered, looked again, walked over to where he had noticed a long coil of rope lying beside a flagstaff never put in place, and his lips set grimly as he returned with it to the skylight.

A broad central pane had been broken out by the storm or accident. Across the stout oaken sash bar Frank securely tied the rope.

Then he let it drop. The light shaft formed a part of the office ceiling way below.

Lights from there dimly permeated the shaft.

Frank had no idea of going that far, however. The length of the rope would not permit it. And, besides, about forty feet down he was sure windows of a converging room opened upon the shaft.

"In a very little while Belton will leave in the wagon," he told himself. "I can't afford to lose sight of him. Here goes!"

Frank got a good tight hold on the rope, and let himself past the broken edges of the pane.

He began to descend sailor fashion—knee catch, elbow crook, slowly but steadily.

"My!"

The ejaculation was jerked out of him. He had gone about twenty feet down. He looked up in alarm.

The rope had slipped from the middle of the sash bar to its lower edge.

"It's giving!" palpitated Frank the next instant.

He guessed what was happening with a thrill of dread.

The rope, coming to the corner of the sash, was grinding against jagged edges of corrugated glass sharp as a knife-blade.

He felt the rope untwist, he began to spin.

There was a tearing sound, the cable parted where it had been tied, and down through space the appalled Frank went hurling.

CHAPTER VIII.

FIRE.

Frank's frightened breath went whistling out of him in a gasp as he plunged downward.

"Lost!" he voiced in a sharp wail—snip!

Something had suddenly halted his descent, but it broke instantly, yet to it, dangling, he caught.

Slam! he struck the side of the shaft halfway down, clutched mightily, focussed his joggling eyesight, reached up with the other hand, grasped an open window sill, pulled himself over it, and fell a quivering heap at its other side.

He had struck a piece of clothesline stretched between two opposite windows fronting the shaft.

One end had held—the primitive efforts of some single-shirted tramp had saved Frank's life.

"I've no time to even enjoy being thankful," he panted, "although it's bubbling up like spring water! Belton—first, last and all of the time!"

No one was in the room. Frank crossed it. He got below and outside.

A glance way up in the direction of the apartment where the

conspirators' confab had just taken place revealed no light anywhere on the top floor.

It was to be presumed that Belton and his comrades had gone to start off on their mysterious night mission Frank had heard them discuss.

Frank went from one to the other of the magnificent stables. He proceeded cautiously, as he saw a light emanating from an open shed door.

A horse and wagon stood ready for service. Belton and his two colleagues had just filled the latter with hay from a manger.

"There's a lot of grain bags upstairs," Frank heard Belton say. "They'll make good pillows and coverings, if we need them."

He took up the lantern he carried as he spoke, and ascended to the loft. The others followed. Frank's eyes snapped with indecision and suspense.

"I'll risk it," he muttered abruptly; "I'll get in."

Frank had burrowed into the closest possible corner under the broad front seat by the time the others returned to the lower floor of the stable.

He was glad to rest. The shock of his recent tumble had been a nerve-jarring one.

He felt completely safe in his retreat, for as Belton got up on the driver's seat, his companions threw themselves on the hay, but the wagon was long, and they lay way back at its rear end where they could make a sloping bolster of the slanting tail-board.

Frank felt himself on the verge of some exciting if not important happenings.

Whether these eventuated in putting him nearer to the secret of the Warren will or the mystery of Belton's diamond knowledge or not, they promised a spice of excitement and danger, that, boy-like, nerved him up to the point of stimulation.

He had all a native Californian's zest for action, and all the collateral grit, and if nothing else resulted from the evening's developments, he might be enabled to balk the schemes of the three desperate conspirators, whom he readily guessed intended to capture a party of camping tourists and sell them into captivity.

Sierra Tom was a name quite familiar to Frank, as to every other well-posted Pacific slope boy.

Train robber, express rifler, mountain outlaw, this desperate criminal had defied justice for nearly two years.

With a price set on his head, he had vanished from public gaze, but Wells, Fargo & Co., the United States Mint, the San Francisco detective force, and a score of private police agencies were ever on the alert for some new demonstration from the desperado, whose long silence boded a broad swath of destruction when he should finally emerge from his hiding place.

The wagon went rather slowly, for the road led up and up. It must have been midnight before a halt was made.

Frank had been nodding. The two men in the rear of the wagon were fast asleep and snoring loudly, and Belton had to wake them up to tell them of their arrival.

"Hello!" gaped the fellow called Bower, "have we got somewhere?"

"Yes, crawl out and shake your wits up. It'll be needed."

The two men sleepily tumbled over the side of the wagon.

"Well," spoke Bowen, "what's the programme?"

He took out his pipe and filled it with tobacco.

"Flare your matches cautiously around here," warned Belton.

"Why?"

"Because we're near our game."

"How near?"

"See where the ground dips—ah! better than that, you can see glint, can't you?"

"Like a dying camp-fire?"

"That's the spot. Now, gentlemen! You pile back into the wagon, and no more snoozing, mind you! In an hour at the furthest I'll have those tourists with solid sleeping caps on."

Belton took a paper package from his pocket, and Frank, peeping through the hay wisps, guessed it must contain the "sleeping powder" he had heard alluded to during the hotel confab.

"One word, Belton," spoke Bowen, as the former moved as if to start away.

"Spiel it!"

"You're sure we won't have our work for our pains? There's booty in sight?"

"Do you fellows imagine I'm going to all this trouble for fun?"

"But I mean outside of Sierra Tom. We may have to wait an age before he gets action on these fellows' bank checks."

"We get their traps instanter, don't we?"

"Something in them?"

"I should say it! I saw them. The picking on the first rake-off is rich as plums. Why! look here—I said they were notables, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Shall I call the roster? Franz Joseph Batterman, Amsterdam—the greatest lapidary in the world—how does that strike you?"

"My!" Frank started so it gave him a crick in the neck.

"Dom Pedro Velasquez, Rio Janeiro—the expert diamond authority of Brazil," continued Belton, grandiloquently.

"My!"

"Farley Powell, New York—professional gem collector for the Queen of England, the Shah of Persia and the Turkish royalty!" concluded Belton, and he rolled the titles under his tongue like a sweet morsel.

"My! Oh, glory! I'm in a dream!"

The quivering Frank fairly writhed with emotion. It was a wonder that the men by the side of the wagon did not hear him thrashing about.

One stunning surprise, one vivid adventure after another had greeted Frank since night began to fall.

He could compare them to firecrackers—big giant fellows going off in startling succession.

But here was the king-bomb of the outfit, with a pyrotechnical explosion that scattered his startled wits like magic.

The glib patter of the embezzling ex-clerk naming over the three men to whom John Gillespie had written the three letters bequeathing his secret of diamond making, the mysterious ingredient, fell upon Frank's ears like a far-away whisper from the past—a voice from the tomb.

In this lonely mountain fastness there seemed to dovetail into all the mysteries of that past, those of the present—vivid, vital, important.

"Now, keep on the alert while I'm gone," directed Belton. "You see that spark of camp-fire?"

"Yes," assented Bowen.

"It's our star of fortune!"

"Hope so."

"It's the beginning glint that is going to lead us to bushels, barrels, cartloads of sparklers!"

"It sounds big!" Frank heard Bowen say, as he scratched a match on the side of the wagon, and lit his pipe.

"It does, for a fact," assented his comrade.

They watched Belton disappear in the direction of the distant camp-fire glow.

And Frank watched, too.

"I'm needed, if ever boy was!" he breathed, all a-thrill. "Those men must be warned—John Gillespie's friends, my friends. This

doesn't mean a mere robbery—it means the secret of diamond-making. They've got it. This scoundrel Belton is after it. Why! to save that I'd go through flood and tornado, and fire—"

Ready at hand, brave Frank Warren.

For at that moment, fired by the match Bowen had carelessly flung away, the hay flared up, and the wagon box burst into a sheet of flame.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CRITICAL MOMENT.

"Fire!"

"S't!"

"Look—it's ablaze—the wagon is burning up!"

"Keep still, you dol! Do you want to spoil everything? In with you, and put it out!"

The two men guarding the vehicle in which Frank Warren was hidden saw the fire promptly. Frank, huddling under the seat, quivering, saw it as well.

He was in a predicament he did not like at all, and the promptings of impulse were very contrary.

If he jumped into view, he would either be captured or, escaping, so excite the suspicions of the crowd he was following or alarm them that his usefulness as a shadow would be materially lessened.

The man Bower had jumped into the wagon at once, and his companion followed suit.

"The coverings!" cried the former.

"What about them?"

"Spread—smother the flames. That's the main point. The fire mustn't be seen by those tourists in camp."

Bags and burlaps were thrown quickly over the hay.

"Now, jump, pound, roll!" directed Bowen.

The heat was blistering, the smoke suffocating, and Frank had winced.

As the men picked and pawed and jumped all over the covered hay, he scrambled and shrank.

Where they had lain the hay had been matted down and burned smoulderingly, but under the seat it was loose and fluffy.

So, as the bags flew over this and pressed it down, Frank felt shut in a furnace and squeezed like a lemon.

He crowded up into one corner, and a kick nearly broke his back.

He wriggled to the other, and two feet plumped across both of his own, almost disabling them.

All the time shut in, sparks, cinders, heat and smoke came at face and hands in a pestering way that broke his nerve.

"Got to get out of this!" decided Frank, and prepared to face his enemies.

"Whoof!" ejaculated Bowen just then, and went sliding.

Frank felt the middle board of the wagon pull out from under him.

He tumbled and spilled, and halfway through an aperture suddenly opened, concluded to drop, did so, and landed flat on the ground under the wagon.

He saw dim outlines of gyrating limbs below, and bobbing, dismayed heads and arms above, where the two men were dancing a foothold jig.

"I see," soliloquized Frank. "The wagon is provided with a patent center-drop board, to shift grain or sand. That fellow kicked the pivot loose, and—I'm out of it!"

Frank was relieved of the fact. He took instant advantage of it.

He crawled cautiously almost under the horses' hoofs, reached some bushes, and resting at a safe distance, congratulated him-

self on an escape that gave him a free range for further observation and action.

The men at the wagon got things back to normal order, and subsided. The flare of the animated adventure over Frank suddenly remembered something that started him up like the prick of a pin.

"Those men!" he ejaculated.

Batterman of Amsterdam, Velasquez of Brazil, Powell of New York—personal peril, the sudden whirl of fire and flutter had momentarily driven them out of his mind.

Now in vivid force returned the thrilling conviction that in the crime of the night contemplated by Belton and his associates was involved not only the capture of these men, to be held for ransom, the appropriation of their personal belongings, but as well the acquirement of the secret of diamond-making, a knowledge of the famous "missing ingredient."

How much Belton had found out about that glorious mystery Frank did not know, but from the extravagant claims of the embezzling ex-clerk he guessed that it was considerable.

Belton had bubbled over in a way that showed he had got some inkling of the fascinating discovery that dazzled sage and dreamer alike.

At all events, the legitimate possessors of John Gillespie's secret were about to be removed from the sphere of action, their knowledge wrested from them for a rascally schemer to bungle or bargain with at his will.

Frank Warren got to his feet and felt his heart swell, and all the courageous vim of his nature pervade every nerve with quicksilver rapidity.

He would have made a great fanatic, once started in on an idea—a second Lord Kelvin, enthusiastic at the marvellous leaps and bounds of X-ray science, a faithful follower of empiric or alchemist of those ages when transmutation was the watchword of genius, and the great intellects of the world hung their faith on the magic spell-symbol, Valency.

But he was aiming for something tangible that passed isomorphism, allotropic silver, and atomic chemistry on the wing—the rearranging of nature's elements so that charcoal could be changed into diamonds.

He had been inoculated with the magic of science, and the fever was working. Frank was the old, eager, dazzled apprentice of Gillespie at that moment, with one thought regnant, supreme—diamonds.

"Where is the camp Belton spoke of?" he murmured.

He could not see the spark or gleam of the camp-fire Belton had referred to, but he set at work to locate it by pursuing the direction he had seen Belton take.

Two hours later Frank Warren sat down on a rock, tired, disheartened, anxious.

He felt that he had made the mistake of his life in leaving the vicinity of the wagon to find the camp of the tourists.

He had now completely lost both, he had got turned all around. Not a sound, not a glint was in evidence.

"Oh, it's too bad—too terribly bad!" he told himself, distressedly. "By this time Belton has probably covered every point he aimed at—fireworks!"

A knife of sudden flame ripped a seam in the western sky, and Frank glared.

Distant, dull, an aerial explosion echoed, attended by a varicolored shower of brilliant sparks.

"A rocket—a signal!" breathed Frank, tumultuously, starting forward in the precise direction of the pyrotechnical display. "That's a guide. Belton's crowd fired it. It's to tell Sierra Tom

BRAVE AND BOLD.

to look out for his captives. What else can it mean? A mile away? half a mile? I'll keep to a bee-line, straight!"

Frank ran. It was up a hill, down a slant, slide, trip, tumble at times, but he pressed on untiringly.

Found them!

Frank let down to a breathless trot as he saw a light ahead. It gleamed through a thin grove of cedars.

The light was a lantern. It sat on the ground near two men—Belton and Bowen.

Frank got as near to them as he dared. Sheltered by a tree, he viewed a spot evidently a recent camping place.

There was a tent, a compact utensil outfit, several satchels, guns and other weapons.

With great anxiety, however, Frank noted not the slightest trace of the three tourists Belton had alluded to. Even the wagon and the third member of Belton's group had disappeared.

Upon the ground before the two men was a blanket. Upon this the eyes of the twain were fixed, and Frank's as interestedly now peered there, too.

It contained three watches, three wallets, a lot of miscellaneous jewelry, and three enveloped letters.

"Why," stared Frank, and paused with a thrill of augury and suspense, for he fancied he knew what those letters were.

And from looking he took to listening. Belton was making a jubilant, animated remark.

"The rocket tells Sierra Tom that his visitors are coming. We've captured the outfit."

"It's worked like a charm so far," returned Bowen. "You are a regular general at scheming."

"That's because I'm a lawyer!" chuckled Belton. "When we're millionaires—"

"Will we be?"

"Directly."

"Say! you're sure of your grounds?"

"Sure? Now look here, Bowen, hasn't every move come off at the tap of the bell, just as I predicted?"

"It has, for a fact."

"Then trust to me. I dosed the three tourists. We sent up the signal rocket. We dumped the notables into the wagon, tied and doped. They're out of our way, off our hands, with no further interest except to collect a few thousands from Sierra Tom when he cashes their checks—say a month hence. We bargain with Jim. He's got no ambition—really he isn't of our sort, and I'm glad to ship him. He agrees to take the horse and wagon, the tent, all those traps, for his share of the plunder. We part company with him, taking the portable valuables, and—the secret."

Bowen rubbed his head thoughtfully, and stared at the blanket.

"In those three letters?"

"Exactly!"

"Belton, it is a strange story you're telling me!"

"Not at all. Here a man named Gillespie in Los Angeles sends three syllables in three different letters to three different men."

"And those three syllables put together make a word?"

"A mystic word—a magical word—the keynote word, the king word of the universe—the missing ingredient in nature that will enable a man to make diamonds!"

"It's great, if it's true."

"Those three fellows come from three corners of the globe, clear out here to California, not knowing Gillespie is dead."

"Don't they know the word?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't exactly make out, but each preserved his secret syllable,

it seems, till they saw Gillespie, and made some kind of a bargain with him."

"And it's in those letters?"

"It is."

"And they're ours?"

"Yes. We get to some city, convert those valuables into ready cash, put the three syllables together, get the missing ingredient, and turn out the sparklers—a ton at a time!"

"Let's see what the word is."

"Can't."

"Why?"

"It's written in some foreign language."

"Ah, pshaw!"

"That needn't bother us. Any college professor will translate it for a dollar."

"Belton," pronounced Bowen, his voice in a quiver of excitement and suspense, "you make me thrill!"

"Oh, we've got the boodle of the world—millions by the neck!" declared Belton, confidently, "no discount on that. Now see here, bundle up that blanket. That's it. Come along."

"It's a big tramp to the nearest town."

"Not for us."

"What do you mean?"

"That we're not going to foot it."

"No?"

"Follow me, and I'll make your eyes snap!"

Belton tucked the bundled-up blanket under his arm, and Bowen did follow him, and Frank, too.

The latter was a little surprised when they came to two tracks lining the extreme edge of a gulch.

"Hello!" spoke Bowen, "here's a railroad!"

"The old Gulf route. Abandoned, like the hotel. Improvements slightly ahead of time in this part of the State. Look in the brush."

"A hand car!"

"Correct, and in passably good order. Help me lift it on."

Frank began to rustle. Unless he acted soon these men would again evade him.

"They shan't! The last ditch, life or death, they shan't!" he declared, desperately. "Three times and out—if the diamond secret misses me this time, my luck's gone, I feel it."

He stooped down behind the bushes where he stood and commenced gathering up an armful of stones.

Then he saw the folly of precipitating a volley of bullets against so ineffective a fusilade, and dropped them.

The two men got the hand car on the tracks.

"Steady!" ordered Belton.

"Steady, what?"

"Hold her tilted till I block the front wheels."

"Why?"

"Why! There's a ninety-foot grade here, and below—whiff! it's steep, I tell you."

"Can we make it?"

"Starting slow and keeping the handles under good control, without trouble."

Belton placed a long, leafless tree branch across the track.

He threw the blanket bundle on the car.

"Get on," he ordered, and then as sharply supplemented, "Hold on!"

"What?" queried Bowen.

"I'm going back to get a share of those weapons. We're entitled to a revolver apiece, I should say."

"Sure!"

Frank stood quivering with excitement, indecision, anxiety.

He formulated a dozen impulsive plans—to dash for the letters, to knock Bowen down unawares, to kick the blocking branch loose, but before he got fairly nerved up to action Belton returned, threw a couple of revolvers on the hand car, and said:

"We'd better take off our coats. It will be hard pumping, part of the way."

"All right."

"My chance, now or never!" thrilled the pulsating Frank.

He made a dash just as the two men had one arm each out of their coats.

With a jarring slam he landed on the hand car.

"Look!"

"Who's this?"

"Stand back!"

Quick as pistol shots rang out Belton's yell of alarm, Bowen's cry of amazement, doughty Frank Warren's ringing challenge.

Wavering, for the car was joggling from the shock of his sudden spring, but firmly planted, a quickly snatched up revolver in either hand, a gritty California boy faced two typical California desperadoes.

It was a *tableaux* that lonely mountain side had never depicted before, but it was suddenly disturbed.

Grind—jar.

Frank tottered. Then he crouched. The two men, desperate, started forward.

From Frank's hands both weapons went hurling.

He was flung flat upon the hand car. The front wheels began to slide, the blocking branch flew free.

Whir-rr!

With a plunge it shot forward, and Belton and Bowen faded from sight.

A curve—there was a swoop that made Frank's hair stream out straight in a tearing rush of air.

He clung to the edge of the car, his eyes dilating, his heart thumping like a pounding beam.

The landscape was a blur, the hand car an arrow, a toboggan sled, a projectile.

Swish-hh-r!

CHAPTER X.

A LEAP FOR LIFE.

The air fairly whistled as the hand car clattered onward and down.

Frank tried to gaze ahead. It was all down at this point, and further on, according to Belton, it would be worse than ever.

Frank would have been jolted, flung or blown from the car in a minute if he had not clung tightly.

The roadbed lined walls of rock cut into on one side. On the other it did not deviate eighteen inches from the sheer drop of the gully.

To leave that hand car, therefore, was to plunge to unknown depths or be battered to pieces against a wall of jagged rock.

"The blanket—the letters!" gasped Frank, suddenly.

Belton's bundle was tip, tip, tipping toward the edge of the hand car at every grind of the wheels.

He freed one hand and grasped one edge of the blanket.

A fearful sweep made aim or clutch a matter of pure accident, but his fingers closed about the three letters.

In a bunch he palmed them, in a bunch he thrust them into his breast.

"Safe—mine!" thrilled Frank, and his exultation nerved him to attempt to check the speed of the hand car.

The handles were working up and down like piston rods. He

bobbed his head nervously, watching the fast whirls of a skipping rope, and endeavoring to time a safe dash beyond its swoop.

Frank arose on one knee, clinging with one hand. Then he made a forward dash.

Bang!

The uplifting handlebar struck his chin and nearly knocked the teeth out of his lower jaw.

Smack!

It caught his head on the downward return, and sent him flat, half-stunned, to the floor of the car.

Frank lay there helplessly. In a kind of voiceless terror he noted the fast spinning landscape.

At certain curves the swift whirring wheels seemed to shriek out a dread warning.

At other sharp declines it seemed as if the car was surely headed for a slip from the rails and a crash over into the gully.

Frank feebly edged his way around to its side, out of range of the flying handles.

He reached up, caught at the edge of the gearing box, and slowly pulled himself erect.

As he did so there was a clangling rattle. It was well that he had got a new and more secure hold, for the car seemed almost to leap into the air.

Then with a clatter it diverged sharply, two rails spread into four—the car had left the main track.

"A siding!" fluttered Frank, "a coaling spur! Yes, and it ends—"

He paused with an awed shiver. His dilating eyes, making out where a coal elevator stood in ruins, saw beyond a hundred-foot stretch of track, opening landscape five hundred feet below.

Toward this abyss the car was shooting. The tracks here, rusted, out of plumb, long unused, were overgrown with weeds and vines. Neglected tree limbs trailed, almost sweeping the car.

Frank was on the gully side. He must, therefore, to leave the car, drop off behind or leap down.

How far, he could not estimate, but it was nothing, he plainly discerned, compared to the sheer drop into nothingness yawning ahead.

"It's a jump for life, and not a second to lose!" he breathed, wildly.

He let go the gearing standard, he fixed his eyes on a tree branch festooning the roadway overhanging the gully.

Then Frank made his spring.

His breast struck the swaying limb. How, in that rapid whirl, he managed to loop both arms about it he did not know. The contact must have bent them involuntarily.

At all events, shivering with the shock, whipped up and down, he clung, half-fainting, in midair.

Snap!

An ominous sound warned him—the branch had broken clear of the tree, and he was falling.

Frank let go. The action sent him sprawling. He must have dropped twenty feet, when he landed on the top of a broad, spreading tree.

Through its branches he went, stripping leaves and twigs. It was clear space once more. He grazed a great projecting rock, grabbed at a bush, held a second, it tore loose, and, rolling, tumbling, gyrating, Frank skimmed the top of another tree, and—landed.

Landed with a suddenness that was appalling, yet he was un-hurt. Giving strands encased him.

"A hammock!" voiced Frank, in petrified amazement and sincere thankfulness.

He had bolted squarely into such a strange receptacle in this strangely out-of-the-way place. What did it mean?

For a brief spell, recovering from the shock of the grouped terrifying adventures of the previous few minutes, Frank did not try to answer that question.

He closed his eyes and lay nestled in soft comfort, content to realize that he was secure.

The letters! He groped to find them where he had placed them. They were all right.

Then an exalted kind of satisfaction lulled his overstrained senses to dreaminess.

He had won in a battle of superior numbers, overpowering circumstances—distinctly, undoubtedly won.

He had rescued from the marplot of his own fortune, the embezzling ex-clerk, Belton, the sole clews to the missing ingredient which made diamond-making a possibility.

Was it his? No, but he felt that he was one of the legatees, in actuality, if not on record, of John Gillespie's famous secret.

Baffling Belton was the first step—to find some means of reaching the captured Batterman of Amsterdam, Velasquez of Rio Janeiro, Powell of New York, was the next consideration.

After that—Frank pictured only one reward, and his ardent heart glowed at the thought of it; to be admitted into that magic circle of alchemy, within which, compared to what he knew, philosophers, prelates, cardinals, even kings, had occupied the position of the most humble apprentices.

He sat up in the hammock at last, disturbing a dream of glory that was a constant presence with the infection of the diamond-making project.

Practical life claimed his energies, and promptly. He was in dangerous proximity to Belton, to Sierra Tom. He was, furthermore, in somebody's hammock. Whose? How came it placed there? Clip!

A missile suddenly took Frank on the side of the head.

"Hello!" he ejaculated.

He got out of the hammock and strained his vision. He was at the bottom of the slant.

A second missile grazed his ears. Watching it drop, he saw that it was a good-sized crab apple.

"Who's bombarding?" he demanded challengingly, aloud.

A third shot exactly flattened the tip of his nose. It was a sensitive spot. Frank's anger got the better of him.

He detected a rustle in some near bushes, and he made a pounce.

"Hold on!"

"Let go!"

Amid such contrary directions coherency was impossible. Frank had grabbed somebody about his own size.

That somebody was a fair match for him, however. There was a scuffle, a trip, a slide, and the next minute Frank and his antagonist went splash into the stream at the bottom of the gully.

CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERIOUS ACQUAINTANCE.

The sudden plunge into the water of the creek cooled the ardor of both combatants instantly.

They released grips. Frank came ashore, dripping and dashing the water from his eyes.

His late antagonist proceeded to a safe distance, and stood grimly staring at him.

"Well, the cheek!" he remarked, explosively.

"Me?" fired up Frank.

"Who else?"

"I like that—pegging hard apples at a fellow, as if he was a scarecrow!"

"What did you get into my bed for, then?"

"What bed?"

"The hammock!"

"Oh, was it yours? Say!" exclaimed Frank, ingenuously, "that's so. Beg pardon. Mine was the blame. Served me right!"

"It don't make either of us very dry," dryly remarked the boy. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Frank. If you care to give me a handle, and I just tumbled over the gully here. Your hammock probably saved my life."

"Oh, you wasn't—prowling?"

"What for?" projected Frank, innocently.

"You needn't answer that question," quickly supplemented the other, catching a glint of Frank's honest eyes. "I see—it's a misunderstanding. Here, get off your shoes and coat and hang them on a limb to dry. Then lay down in the hammock again."

"You're the right kind, Mr. ——" smiled Frank.

"Gil."

"But I won't rob you of your bed. Truth is, I want to get out of this vicinity."

"Why?"

The boy calling himself Gil came a little nearer to Frank, and eyed him over keenly, putting a strong, interested emphasis on the word.

"Well, I—I do," rather flustered Frank.

"Afraid of something?"

"Not exactly."

"Trying to get away from somebody, then?"

"You might say that."

"If I guess who, will you tell me?"

"You're a queer fellow!" commented Frank. "You look as serious as if it was some of your affair."

"Maybe it is," answered Gil, enigmatically. "Just one question: Are you concerned in any deal where Sierra Tom is concerned?"

Frank gave a vivid start. He was, yes—he was not; no. Gillespie's friends were in the outlaw's power, but really he hadn't yet exactly planned what he would do.

About all he had so far thought of was in keeping out of Belton's way with the diamond secret.

"Suppose I am?" he queried, finally.

"Then don't make a move to-night," very soberly advised Gil.

"Why not?"

Sierra Tom's people are thick as bees around here."

"How do you know?"

"Well, it's my business to know. Look here, I don't want to pry into your secrets, but just from a friendly feeling I offer to let you bunk in here till morning. Then I'll guide you to the nearest settlement safely. That's all."

"I'll just do what you say," spoke up Frank, after a brief reflective pause, "and I vote you the best kind I've struck for a long time. You don't live around here?"

"Oh, bless you, no! I'd just as soon tell you this—I'm a college student, halfway through my course, and I'm here trying to earn enough to pay my way when school begins again."

"Why, what doing?" projected blunt Frank.

"It is part of my contract," answered Gil, courteously, but firmly, "that I tell nobody that."

Frank declared his new acquaintance a decidedly strange fellow, and he could not make him out at all.

Gil manipulated the hammock with pieces of wood so that

both could lay in it comfortably, and after some casual conversation Frank went to sleep.

He awoke once, about midnight. His companion was gone. Frank peered down the gully. He was sure that he made out Gil stealthily moving about, as if listening and watching, but fell to sleep almost immediately again, and when he awoke it was daylight.

Gil had a little knapsack open by the side of the hammock, and from it was taking some hard, thick crackers and dried beef.

Frank was not unwilling to share a breakfast to which he was made genially welcome.

In broad daylight he liked his new companion's face even better than the night before.

"I can take you to the nearest settlement just as well as not," spoke Gil. "I have to go there on a little business myself."

"I'll be glad of your company," said Frank.

He was terribly curious to know if the boy was coming back again, and why.

Thinking over the fact that Gil seemed to know something about Sierra Tom, and realizing that very soon he, Frank, must make an effort to get at Sierra Tom's captives, the three friends of John Gillespie, he would have been quite willing to exchange a limited set of confidences with this queer fellow, who was earning his way through college by sleeping in a hammock, way out in the wildest part of California.

However, Frank's mind mainly centered on stowing the three letters that contained the Gillespie clew to diamond-making in some safe place, and informing the police officials at the nearest settlement of the hiding place of Sierra Tom, hoping this would urge them up to rescue Batterman, Velasquez and Powell.

"Wait here. I'll bring the shoes and coats," remarked Gil. "They must be dry by this time."

He proceeded to the creek on his errand. Frank took out the three letters. They had got only dampened in the quick plunge the night previous, and he noted that they were quite dry now.

He thrust them back quickly, as a sharp ejaculation startled him from the vicinity of the creek.

"I call that meaner than dirt!" rang out Gil's tones.

"What?" propounded Frank.

"Come here and see."

Frank approached the tree where their coats and shoes had been hung up to dry the night previous.

All these articles had vanished, and in their stead, lying on the ground, were two worn, ragged garments and two pairs of coarse, heavy shoes, full of holes, and with worn soles.

"Some one has stolen the others," began Frank.

"And left these! It's a shame! Come, though. No use crying over spilled milk. We can't go barefooted."

Gil grumbled a good deal while they were trying to imagine the substituted articles fitted. Then he took down the hammock, rolled it up into small compass, and was just putting it into his knapsack when he gave a sudden start, and arose to his feet in a flash.

"Did you hear a whistle?" he demanded of Frank, bending his ear sharply.

"I thought it was some bird."

"No. There it is again—at another point of the compass, and again!"

"What of it?" asked Frank, very much surprised at his companion's instantaneous seriousness and evident perturbation.

Gil stood looking very grave and thoughtful. Then he said, rapidly:

"We will leave here at once—that way," and he pointed in the

one direction from which the whistle had not sounded. "Wait here a minute."

He disappeared among the timber. Frank stood trying to guess what it all meant. Then he got tired of waiting for Gil to return, and strolled restlessly about.

He drew back, feeling that he was in a measure intruding on his friend's privacy, as quite accidentally he came across Gil, his back to him, stooping at the trunk of a tree.

Gil was digging the dead wood out of a knot-hole as if to enlarge it for a hiding place for something.

Despite himself, Frank saw what. He could not help it, for two very marked and noticeable objects lay on the ground at Gil's side.

One was a sheet of paper, and it had this indorsement:

"Map of Sierra Tom's hiding place, and instructions."

It was not very enlightening, but it was somewhat startling to Frank.

The second object, however, was a positive revelation to Frank. With quite a shock he regarded it, clearly guessing the college boy's interest in Sierra Tom now.

It was a bright silver badge, and it bore across its glinting front the two impressive words:

"Secret Service."

CHAPTER XII.

A FATAL EXCHANGE

Frank backed from the tree where the boy Gil was hiding, incriminating evidences of his real mission in the wilderness, a little ashamed at having even unwittingly penetrated a personal secret, and decidedly impressed with a due sense of the importance of a person, who, boy though he was, represented a distinguished branch of the government.

"Secret service?" murmured Frank, "that means one of the highest powers in the land. I see how it is. The full-grown fellows can't catch Sierra Tom. They have hired Gil to help them. Those whistles he must trace to some of Sierra Tom's band, and he's getting rid of anything that would give him away."

More than that, when Gil returned to the knapsack, never suspecting that Frank had left it during his absence, he proceeded to take from it a thick-leaved book and a long tin tube. With one under his arm and another strung with a strap from his shoulder, he would have passed anywhere as a collector of botanical specimens.

He led the way along the gully, and Frank followed him. Gil was quite chatty, and conversed on a variety of subjects that were both entertaining and instructive.

Somehow, however, Frank proved a poor listener. He was thoughtful and restless.

Here was an individual who could direct him, probably best of any person in the world, how he could get at Sierra Tom and the captives, Batterman, Velasquez and Powell.

Why not tell him how the land lay, and enlist his co-operation?

They had been on the tramp for about two hours, and had just halted under the first trees of a forest leading away from the gully, and Frank had just concluded to make a confidant of his companion, when once again in the distance those mysterious whistles rang out.

"I don't like that!" he heard Gil mutter, and his face fell perceptibly. "Nights they might venture to prowl around, but they are getting decidedly bold to chase about in broad daylight. They must be after something particular."

"It means Sierra Tom's band," murmured Frank to himself,

and remembering that Belton was hand-in-glove with the mountain outlaw, he added: "Maybe it's me they're after!"

"Wait here, I want to do a little investigating," directed Gil.

He threw his knapsack to Frank, and shot away like an Indian runner.

Frank expected him back promptly, but half an hour went by, and then an hour, and he began to grow decidedly impatient.

He took out the three letters finally, and for the first time opened them.

There were the communications that John Gillespie had told him about.

There in the corner of each was the one-third of the vital secret of diamond-making.

Frank glanced at the fragmentary syllables that meant so much.

"Oh, dear!" he instantly ejaculated, in dire dismay and bewilderment.

Each one of the syllables was in a different kind of letters—in a foreign language.

Not German, French, or any of the Latin tongues, as Frank had hoped, but in some script that looked like Greek or Hebrew, and might be Chaldaic or Hindoo, for all Frank knew.

"Pshaw!" he ejaculated. "But, say! another reason why I should make a confidant of Gil. He's fresh from college. Why, he may be able to translate them quick as a wink."

Frank got up, quite taken with his idea, and immensely pleased as well, as he saw Gil coming toward him at that moment.

All his plans faded away at once, however, as he caught sight of Gil's face.

It was pale and worried, and he was all out of breath.

"Quick!" he spoke, throwing himself on the ground. "Off with your shoes!"

"What!" ejaculated Frank.

"Do as I say. Don't lose a moment."

He had his own off in a jiffy. Frank followed his example, but wonderingly, almost with alarm.

"If you'll tell me," he began.

"Throw them away."

Frank stared stupidly at his eccentric companion, who did just this with his own shoes, and snatching those from Frank's hand, gave them a vigorous fling as well.

"See here!" cried Frank.

"Now, run!"

"What! barefooted?"

"Don't stop to argue!" snapped out Gil, sharply.

"But what does this mean?"

"First, that we are very likely to be taken by Sierra Tom's band."

Frank felt of the precious letters in his pocket, and thrilled quickly.

"Next, we're in a bad fix on account of those shoes."

"How?"

"They belonged to some persons whom Sierra Tom is chasing down."

"Well, he's after the owners, not the shoes, isn't he?"

"Not in this case."

"Why not?"

"Hear that?"

Frank started. His companion paled.

It was not a whistle this time—it was a queer, ominous, prolonged baying sound.

"That's what I mean—run for your life!" directed Gil.

"Why, they're—"

Frank Warren felt his heart beat faster at his companion's startling reply:

"Sierra Tom's bloodhounds, and they are directly on our trail!"

CHAPTER XIII.

TRACKED DOWN.

Sierra Tom's bloodhounds!

Frank Warren felt his blood curdle at the dread announcement.

"Run for your life!"

He needed no second bidding to join his companion, Gil, in a wild forward dash.

They were barefooted now, and Gil made straight through the timber.

Nut husks, twigs, stones, thorns scraped and cut, vines and tree roots stubbed and tripped, but, a cyclone of desperate, resolute action, Gil maintained a vigorous rate of speed, caught Frank when he stumbled, grabbed him, urging him onward whenever he faltered.

"Are we in great particular danger?" panted Frank.

"Yes," came the concise affirmative.

"Why?"

"I don't want to be seen—that is my main anxiety—by any of Sierra Tom's men."

"Because they'd know you?"

"Because they might suspect me—yes, and because—"

"Why, how can they when—"

Frank stopped short in his talk and Gil stopped short in his gait. "When what?" he shot out in that quick, challenging way of his.

"When—say, I'm no sneak or pryer, but I accidentally saw something you hid."

Gil frowned slightly and then shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

"Let it go!" he remarked. "Perhaps it's as well you know the truth. Yes, I'm that."

"Secret service?" whispered Frank in an impressed way.

"Just. But don't lisp it, even to yourself. Our present danger, however, is greater than what I thought. Those two men who stole our shoes are either members of Sierra Tom's band running away from him, or escaped prisoners. He has set his bloodhounds after them."

"Are they very terrible?"

"Like their master—bloodthirsty brutes, and nearly the size of lions. I saw them pull down an unfortunate once. They tore him almost to pieces. They have found the shoes. Hear them bay! Nearer than I thought. We shall soon know if we have broken the trail."

Gil seemed to be making for some certain point. A calculating eagerness in his manner betrayed this fact.

"Give me half an hour more," he said, "and I promise to hide you where neither dogs nor men can find us."

The trees were growing scarcer now. They were by no means out of the forest, but the trees were much larger and higher.

"Two miles more and we've made it," encouraged Gil.

"Say," ventured Frank, "I guess you'll have to count me out."

"Oh, come now!"

"Yes, I am out of breath and my feet are cut to pieces. You see, I was sick a spell ago."

"Rest a minute, then—only a minute, though," supplemented Gil, bending his ear anxiously.

Frank sat down, took off his coat, and, tearing one whole side of rotten lining out of place, wrapped it around his right foot, which was cut pretty badly and bleeding.

"Run!"

He was on his feet in a flash. Every pistol-shot order of his companion meant something. Frank had begun to learn that, and he needed no urging now.

Gil grabbed up his coat and wadded it together with his own under his arm.

"Was that another bay of the hounds?" asked Frank.

"It was, and coming toward us. It's an unfortunate thing we ever put on those shoes."

"I should say so!"

"I am afraid we cannot reach the point of safety I spoke of."

"What shall we do, then?"

"You see those six or eight big trees ahead?"

"On a little rise? Yes."

"Make for them. If the hounds seem to be gaining much on us we will have to perch aloft."

"And what then?"

"Trust to luck. It won't do to get caught in the open space beyond. They're coming, straight! Why do they chase us so persistently, when we dropped the shoes? Why—I know!"

"Why?"

"Run—fly! I see the first hound back of us. He has just broken cover."

Frank was in such a quiver of dread and eagerness to reach even a temporary place of safety that he did not venture to look back.

He had something besides Gil's word for evidence of the proximity of their sanguinary trailers, as, fierce, resolute, triumphant, almost, a new note of canine ferocity sounded dreadfully near to them.

Panting and wild-eyed, Gil ran to the first large tree of the group he had designated, and Frank almost staggered against it.

"I'm strongest—I'll boost," hurried Gil. "Up you go!"

"Don't bother, I can climb."

"To the first big limb. Here we are. Whew!"

"I should say it!"

Both boys were dripping; their breath came in short, pained gasps.

Gil, however, steadied his knapsack on a framework of limbs and began opening it hurriedly.

Frank stared with wildly throbbing heart back the course they had come.

"My!" he thrilled.

A bounding figure, coming straight as an arrow for their place of refuge, fascinated him.

A second, slightly to the rear, followed, without the deviation of an inch, it seemed, from the lead of the first bloodhound.

Tongues lolling, their mouths all afoam, eyes red and lurid, covering the ground without seeming effort, the immense animals, double the size of any dog Frank had ever seen, sped forward at the rate of speed employed by a blooded horse in a race.

Suddenly the forward hound halted, with a kind of challenging snarl.

Its mate came up with a responding note.

Both sniffed the ground and slowly made for some high brush to the left.

"They are off the scent," murmured Frank, "No," and his heart sank; "here they come again!"

Whatever had diverted them, its influence was only temporary, for, coming straight back to the trail, they circled twice, and bounded forward with fresh vitality and confidence.

"They're here!" uttered Frank in a gasp, looking down with a shudder.

Both dogs had haunched. Two enormous heads were lifted.

"They've run us down!" shivered Frank.

Bang!

Frank shrank. So near was the report that it deafened him, and a hot flash of breath seared his face.

Bang—bang—bang—bang—bang!

Seven shots, one frightful yelp from below, an angry snarl, and, as the powder smoke drifted clear, Frank saw one of the hounds stretched back rigid, with glassy eyes.

The other was running round and round, limping, but glaring aloft with renewed ferocity.

"Take care—oh, dear!"

Frank, in a tremor of the most vivid excitement, jiggled the branch at his elbow.

Upon it rested an open box of cartridges which Gil had placed there, ready to reload his rapidly discharged weapon.

He shot out a quick hand, but a copper shower rained athwart his fingers.

"Too bad!" murmured Frank in dismay.

"Yes, for the other box is in my coat pocket."

"Say! Where is your coat?"

Frank, with a sudden, startled stare, looked quietly about their resting place in the tree.

"And mine!" he voiced breathlessly.

"I threw them away."

"What!"

Frank's utterance was a vivid scream.

"Fancied maybe they gave the hounds the scent," began Gil.

"Where? Where?" frantically demanded Frank.

"Back in the brush——"

Frank understood without further explanation.

Where the hounds had paused and diverged from the straight trail it had been to investigate the bundled up coats there.

"Say! hold on," began the mystified Gil.

"My coat!"

"But——"

Frank Warren dashed away the detaining hand of his wondering companion.

He saw nothing but that garment in his mind's eye now.

He cared nothing for a fifteen-foot fall, a gaping-jawed blood-hound, awaiting him below.

"The letters—the diamond-making secret!" gasped Frank, fervidly. "I left them in the coat!"

Frank dropped.

He struck the ground with something of a shock.

A great bristling object hurtled through the air the minute he landed.

It was the wounded bloodhound, with wide-open, great-fanged jaws aiming straight for his throat.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SECOND SYLLABLE.

Frank had acted, was acting, under a strain of excitement so intense that everything was obscured except the sole object in view—to regain the coat and recover the three letters it contained.

The dismayed cry of his startled friend aloft mingled with the savage snarl of the enraged enemy below.

Frank saw the bloodhound coming, and he naturally dodged.

It swept over him, its hot breath searing his face, one of its paws striking his hand and lacerating it.

Frank grabbed for something with which to defend himself.

The merest travesty of a weapon, the sharp sprint of a tree branch, was all his groping fingers reached.

BRAVE AND BOLD.

Before he could get fully erect the hound reversed nimbly and came at him again.

Frank put up his hand to feebly beat off that horrible head descending upon him.

"Ugh!"

He shuddered and shrivelled. He thought at first his hand was going down the animal's throat.

It did, pretty near. The hound's jaws enclosed the opposing fist, but, as well, the short splinter it held.

That jammed back into the roof and bottom of the enormous mouth and—stuck.

"Disabled!" gasped Frank.

He sprang to his feet as the hound dropped to the ground.

In wild agony, blood and froth raining from its mouth, it rolled and pawed and snarled and yelped in frenzy.

The splinter stuck like a driven nail. It held the jaws opened to their widest, divesting the animal of its most formidable means of assault or defense.

"Catch!" came a comprehending, relieved voice from overhead. The revolver flashed past Frank.

"Load—shoot! Quick!"

Frank's fingers trembled as he groped for one of the scattered cartridges.

He got it in place, ran at the hound, fired, missed it, and the next minute Gil came bounding down from the tree, snatched the weapon away and gathered up a whole handful of the cartridges.

Frank did not wait another instant. He darted back to where the coats had been thrown.

Three reports rang out as he did so, but he did not look back to note their effect.

He came upon the two coats. They had been nosed about by the bloodhounds, but were not otherwise disturbed.

One, two, three—the letters were safe. Frank made sure of a secure stowage this time, thrusting the precious missives into his shirt pocket.

The strain of the intense excitement of grouped and rapidly accumulating adventures was beginning to tell on him, and as he hurried back to the tree it was with a very unsteady step.

He found the second hound gasping its last breath. Gil's bullets had been effective.

"Did you find the coats?" projected the latter, with a curious stare.

"Yes," nodded Frank.

"Something you'd left in yours?"

"That was it. I got it. What's the matter? What did you hear?"

"Those whistles again. Ah! The dogs were only the advance guard. Their owners are following them up."

"Where?" queried Frank, looking anxiously around.

"They'll be in sight very soon. We had better put all the space we can between the dead hounds and ourselves. We don't want to be identified as the persons who killed Sierra Tom's pets."

"It was self-preservation."

"He won't look at it that way," observed Gil, significantly.

They pressed forward anew. Frank's gait had become a lagging one. Gil, looking back, abruptly pushed him behind a big tree they were near.

"Don't show yourself," he ordered.

"Some one in view?"

"Back of us—yes. I don't believe we were seen. Get up into the tree, keeping close on this side. Can you make it?"

"Surely."

Frank got aloft, and Gil after him, without rounding the other surface of the trunk.

From the screening shelter of thick branches and leaves they looked back through the timber.

"One, two, three, four, five, six," counted Gil, peering keenly.

"Men?"

"They'll be demons when they see the dead bloodhounds."

"Do you think they will trace us?"

"We can only trust to luck. A mile more and we could have defied them."

"I'm sorry, but my strength seems all to have given out."

"Oh, we'll make the best of this, and it may be better than we think," encouraged Gil.

Frank now could see the six men his companion had counted.

They came forward on a keen run.

"They've got another dog with them," said Frank.

"Eh? What! I didn't see that. Why, so they have."

"In leash."

"To follow the trail of the others."

"Oh, my!"

Gil shot out a quick hand and grabbed Frank as the latter uttered the ejaculation in a piercing tone.

From Frank's quick start and flutter, he fancied he was going to take another tumble.

"What's the matter?" he interrogated.

"Those men!"

"Yes—Sierra Tom's crowd—some of them, at least."

"One of them," pursued Frank, slowly; "yes, two of them, I know."

"Do you?"

"Belton—Bowen," murmured Frank, surveying the distant crowd with a lengthening face. "They may have been after the two men who stole our shoes, but they are also after me."

"What you been doing?"

Frank was fairly challenged. He looked earnestly, anxiously, into the clear, practical, business eye of his comrade.

"Gil," he said, "I'm going to tell you."

"That's right."

"You've helped me out, and holding back my secret may complicate affairs, which would not be right, after all you've done for me. They're scattering—see?"

"Yes; they're going to take a look for us, that's sure."

The six men had been led straight up to the tree where the two dead bloodhounds lay by the live one they held in leash.

The boys could hear a wild outcry, a confab of enraged and vindictive ruffians.

Then the group deployed, and from their maneuvers it was certain that they were about to prosecute a systematic search for the fellows who had killed the bloodhounds.

"Do you think they will trace us?" inquired Frank, anxiously.

"With that new hound on the scent, perhaps, in time."

"Then listen."

It was a queer situation—it's duplicate would come rarely in the experience of the average boy, even a California boy, a type not unused to wild and adventurous environment.

The two boys perched in a tree—both in deadly peril from the crossed interests, vindictiveness and suspicions of men who were outlaws, and, therefore, without mercy.

Discovery haunted every passing moment. Frank Warren talked fast.

He told his companion all that was necessary to make things clear.

Gil listened like a person drinking in a tale of the magic and sorcery of the forgotten ages, and Frank saw that the glamour and glitter of the magnetic project so dear to his heart had the power to captivate every other that came under its influence.

"Well," commented Gil, simply, but with emphasis, when the story was concluded. "Well!"

"What am I going to do?" asked Frank, anxiously.

"Where's those letters?" propounded Gil, practically.

Frank produced them.

"Want my advice?" inquired Gil.

"I do—badly."

"I'll do anything to keep that secret from falling again into the hands of that man, Belton."

"Will you trust me entirely?"

"Yes, I will!" voiced Frank, with final determination.

Gil opened the letters and spread them out.

"Those are the really important part of the matter?" he inquired, running his finger over the syllable written in the corner of each missive.

Frank nodded an assent.

Gil tore from each letter the corner in which the syllables were written.

Then he crumpled up the letters and envelopes, thrust them into his pocket and spread the three scraps on his knee.

"Now, then," he said.

"Translate them, can you?" inquired Frank, eagerly.

"The first is Greek."

"Oh!"

"It reads, 'Mon.'"

Frank thrilled like a novice admitted to some mystic circle and awarded the first degree.

"The second—um—um—the last is Hebrew."

"Can you read it?"

"Just recently studied the alphabet. It is 'ITE.'"

Frank memorized the syllable as if he was absorbing drops of precious gold.

"And the second syllable of the word—why did you skip that?" he queried.

Gil was rubbing his chin in a perplexed and hopeless way.

"Because it's a puzzler," he vouchsafed.

"You mean you can't make it out?"

"I never saw those symbols before."

"But, of course, they mean something?"

"Oh, certainly! I don't comprehend the wisdom of the universe, and my being stumped is quite natural. It's some obscure language, but I suppose there's professors up at our college who can tell what those three little signs mean in a twinkling."

"They're coming!"

"Eh!" projected the absorbed Gil.

Three of their pursuers, the bloodhound in the lead, were coming straight for the tree.

"Take these, tear them to the merest fragments, chew them up, obliterate them," directed Gil hurriedly, and he handed the letters and two of the syllable scraps to Frank.

"But—"

"Do as I say. Now, see here—you won't forget the two syllables I've given you?"

"'MON-ITE'—never!" declared Frank.

"The third one is the connecting link. How shall we preserve it?"

"They'll search me for the merest scrap of the letters," said Frank.

"Yes. Let me see."

While Frank made a litter of the rest of the letters Gil studied the little scrap on his knee closely.

Then he took out his pocket-knife. He began industriously cutting a smooth spot into the bark of the trunk of the tree.

This done, he used the point of the knife as he might a graver's tool.

"See," he said, "I have made a perfect copy of the third syllable of the secret."

"Yes," murmured the intensely excited Frank.

"Can you remember this tree?"

"I will take a good look around and fix it in my mind."

"Then, whatever happens, you will always know where to look for the signs we dare not perpetuate in any other way. Are you sure of your ground, Frank?"

"Yes—'MON-ITE' and the second and missing syllable on the bark here, where no one will ever think of looking for it but ourselves."

"That's it."

Gil handed Frank the little telltale scrap of paper.

Frank put it in his mouth and chewed it to pulp.

"Now let Belton search all he wants to," he observed, triumphantly.

At that moment there came a sharp hail from under the tree.

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTURED!

Three men and the bloodhound had halted directly under the tree in which Frank and Gil were hiding.

"Hey, you, up there!"

Frank had disposed of every fragment of the three letters and looked exultant.

Gil had taken out of his knapsack the book of the botanical cylinder, and acted quite cool and resigned.

"Hey, yourself!" he called down placidly, and then in an undertone to Frank he added: "Let me run things with that crowd."

"Hello!" uttered a surprised voice, "that don't sound like the traitors we're after."

"Come down, you, or we'll bring you down!" sang out another member of the trio, and a pistol snapped.

Gil began to descend, dropped from the lowermost branch, gave his cap a jaunty touch and, facing the three men and the dog, said cheerfully:

"Morning, gents."

"Well, you're a cool one," projected a big, brawny fellow who seemed to be the leader of the pursuing party. "Who are you, anyway?"

Gil flipped the leaves of his book and tapped his tin box.

"Flower picker," he pronounced.

"Bah!" ejaculated the man in disgust. "Say," to the others, "we've been hunting the wrong crowd. The two fellows who ran away have given us the slip. Tom will have a fit over this."

"But the hounds ran this trail."

"Oh," spoke up Gil, "some one stole our shoes and we wore theirs."

"Youngsters," demanded the man, sternly, "how about those dogs?"

"We killed them."

"Do you know its worth your life to confess it?"

"It was our lives, anyway, if we didn't."

"Hey! Hurrah! Zip! Say!"

Just here Belton, who was one of the trio, made a dash.

Frank feared recognition, and had been pretty slow in appearing on the scene.

Now that he did so the embezzling ex-clerk ran instantly forward and seized him, alive with excitement and joy.

"That the boy who ran away on the hand car you told us about?" asked Gil's interlocutor.

"It is. Say! who are you? Say! where's those watches and wallet, and those letters—yes, those letters? You're the boy—don't deny it. Where are they?"

Frank was hustled about vigorously, but he did not lose his composure.

He discerned at once that the disguise John Gillespie had given him in Los Angeles completely shielded his true identity from Belton.

"Don't shake the daylights out of me, quite!" vociferated Frank. "What watches? What wallets? What letters?"

"In a blanket, on the hand car that you jumped on last night."

"Why," declared Frank, innocently, "do you suppose I saw anything but stars in that wild ride? It was my life I was after when I got going lickety-switch. It ran off on a spur. You'll find the blanket, and your watches, and wallets somewhere strewn along the track."

"Sure, boy—sure, boy?" cried Belton. "What did you steal our hand car for?"

"To get out of the meanest, loneliest district I ever struck," proclaimed Frank, bluntly.

"Come on, Bowen!" shouted Belton exuberantly to a member of the second group of searchers, who now came running up. "I've found the fellow who stole our car."

"Who is he?"

"Some harum-scarum wildcat, who got his full of a free ride. I know where the stuff is—papers and all. Come on. Boys, tell Tom I'll see him later—personal business now."

Belton and Bowen started away, conversing animatedly. The other two men approached, one of them with a surly stare fixed on Gil.

"I know that boy!" he proclaimed.

"Eh? What?" queried the leader.

"He's the one I told Tom about. He's been spying around here for three weeks."

"He says he's a flower specimen gatherer?"

"You bring him along. Tom saw him, too, and if he knows him it's all day with you, youngster!"

Gil's face changed its color a trifle.

"So you're going to take me with you, are you?" he demanded.

"Well, I guess so! Bring the other kid, too. Boys, we've missed the two runaways, but maybe these two will make up for it in Tom's estimation, specially the big one."

Frank looked anxiously at Gil. He got nearer to him.

"Does Sierra Tom know you?" he inquired.

"Yes," whispered back Gil.

"Then—"

"I took my risk, and I'll have to take my medicine," came the philosophical response, attended by a careless shrug of the shoulders.

"Grit to the core!" reflected Frank. "Well, I'll see Batterman, Velasquez and Powell now, I suppose."

The four outlaws started the boys in front of them, heading back the way they had come.

"I say," projected Gil, facing them suddenly, "I suppose you wouldn't do something for a poor fellow?"

"Shoot it out," directed the leader gruffly.

"There's an old cabin about a mile ahead."

"Is there?"

"I've camped there at times. It isn't much out of your route. I want to get something I left there—another specimen book. Will you let me?"

"Playing innocent flower boy yet, eh?" sneered the man who had identified Gil.

"Will you do it?—that is the question," retorted Gil.

"Go ahead," growled the leader.

Gil proceeded in the contrary direction. Frank kept by his side.

"What are you up to, Gil?" queried the latter in a whisper. "Escape?"

"Don't think of it, unless you want a bullet."

"What, then?"

"Why, I told—I have another specimen book in the cabin."

"Yes, but that's not all you're after."

"Wait and see."

Frank was curious and anxious. Gil's lips were compressed, his face glum.

He went along like a person revolving some steady purpose in mind that was serious and weighty.

"Gil," ventured Frank again, after a pause, "are you afraid?"

"Afraid!"

"Gil silenced his comrade with a look.

"Then—worried?"

"If you mean, do I think Sierra Tom will ever let me loose when he gets me—no."

"That's a bad prospect," muttered Frank, drearily.

"I knew that when I began my task."

"Secret service?"

"S-st!"

They had reached a broken-down hovel. It was a little beyond the edge of the forest, and set squarely back against a perpendicular wall of rock.

"This is the place?" inquired the leader.

"Yes," nodded Gil.

"Get your book. I'll go in and get it with you."

The two disappeared past the broken door of the shanty.

Sure enough, Gil came out with another book under his arm, and this seemed to throw the four men off their guard.

They accommodatingly waited while Gil knelt near the side of the cabin, apparently rearranging his traps in more portable shape.

Frank watched him nervously. Somehow, he could not divest himself of the impression that Gil's face, pale, serious, resolute, predicted an unexpected move.

He knew it, as with a sudden spring, Gil landed next to a pile of wood, where a keen-edged hatchet rested on the chopping log.

This Gil had snatched up. His eyes were snapping with a mingled excitement and desperation.

"Here!"

"What's he doing?"

Two of the outlaws instantly sprang forward.

Before they could intercept him, however, Gil had reached the rocky wall.

For the first time Frank observed running up it and here and there covered by vines, a thick, heavy rope.

It appeared to scale the cliff, run over it and sustain some immense weight on the other side, for where its near end was anchored by a chain around an immense rock it strained as taut as a ship's cable.

"Stop him—he's up to something!" yelled the outlaw leader. Clip!

With one deft stroke, Gil dealt the rope a destructive blow.

The keen edge of the hatchet severed the strands like magic.

Tearing loose, the immense cable went whirling aloft like a great gyrating serpent.

Way over the cliff something fell, something struck.

Then came a crash like sudden thunder, a crash that shook the air with the far-reverberating vibrations of a tremendous dynamite blast.

"What have you done?" palpitated the electrified Frank.

Gil turned to confront the crowd, a hero's triumph in his brave

face, a hero's thrilling intensity in his echoing tones, as he uttered three mystic, emphatic words:

"Telegraphed to Washington!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A HOLE IN THE GROUND.

Telegraphed to Washington!

Frank Warren regarded the heroic speaker, Gil, with a thrill.

Those words rang out full of purpose, full of menace, every syllable, every accent falling upon the ears of the four outlaws like a message of doom.

Their faces dismayed and startled, they formed a part of a tableau so vivid that Frank could scarcely consider it real.

Boom-m-m-m!

A thousand reverberating echoes followed the first appalling crash.

Frank could imagine the fleet wings of sound carrying further and further away from that lone spot, nearer and nearer to some intended destination, a message, a warning, an alarm.

Gil dropped the keen-edged hatchet. He looked unflinchingly in the faces of the four brawny, ferocious fellows who had failed to prevent what they instinctively recognized as a deadly menace.

The giant of the quartet drew back his snarling lips till his teeth showed like ravenous tusks.

The other three, hands to belts, advanced upon Frank, bristling with the sinister crouch they would assume in surrounding a netted animal they intended to destroy.

Vague as had Gil's announcement been, Frank fancied he guessed its meaning.

One thing was apparent—the outlaws understood it completely, and the bearing of Gil as he now squarely confronted them showed the desperate bravery of a person who had risked all on one big move and is willing to take the consequences.

"What's he done?" demanded one of the quartet, hoarsely.

"A signal explosion!"

"Eh?"

"Hatchet—rope—rock on other side—can of dynamite—bang!"

"Well!"

"He's a spy, as we guessed—dared to come where full-grown men are scarce and made scarcer the closer they get to Sierra Tom's lair. That explosion is a message to friends over the divide. They signal the settlement—San Francisco—the young tiger cub is right—he has telegraphed to Washington!"

"Secret service force?"

"Why not?"

"Telling them—"

"Who knows? 'Move,' maybe. Move it will be when Tom hears of this, but, youngster," continued the speaker, with a terrible look at Gil, "you've signed your death warrant."

Gil did not saw a word. Frank noticed his lips compress tighter and there was a little white line at their corners—that was the only emotion he expressed.

The leader of the quartet proceeded to secure a piece of rope and tied the two boys arm to arm.

"Now, then, march!" he ordered, gruffly, "and no more hatchets or other flare tricks, or we'll constitute ourselves the judge and jury instead of Sierra Tom."

Frank looked ruefully at his companion as they were hurried on. He read a terrible tragic situation in their environment.

"Gill," he managed to whisper, "you're in an awful fix."

"Yes," nodded Gil, calmly.

"Death!"

"I suppose so. I took my life in my hands when I came here."

They told me so. I knew it, but it was big money—a great temptation—for it meant enough to pay my way through college."

Frank felt dreadfully sorry for his comrade. Gil's high purposes, devoid of any sensational tinge of posing as a detective, touched him immensely.

"Confound it all!" flared out Frank, indignantly. "It's a shame—killing a mere boy—"

"I took a man's place," remarked Gil, philosophically.

"What did you mean by 'telegraphing to Washington?'" inquired Frank.

"Just what I said. It is understood by those over the line of the outlaws' dominion, ten miles away, that when I fire that dynamite I have reached the last ditch, and it is now or never to make a descent on Sierra Tom's band.

"That may save you?"

"If the authorities act in time."

Frank was dreadfully worried, so much so that his own possible peril, the results of a bootless return on the part of Belton, whom he had sent on a fool's errand, made no impression on his mind.

He was thinking what a royally grand partner Gil would make in the diamond-making business, with all his learning and perseverance.

But all projects of that sort, the secret syllable carved in the tree, the two in his memory, the glamour and fascination of the missing ingredient, were obscured completely and lost all their zest as Frank fancied what lay before his friend and himself when they reached the lair of Sierra Tom.

Frank did not wonder, as the proceeded, that the fugitive outlaw was able to hold the police force of a great State at bay.

Strange, hidden paths, secret avenues, running through rocky gorges, tunnel courses, penetrating such in tortuous progress, the outlaws finally reached a summit looking down on an immense ravine.

Frank at a glance took in the scene as the site of an abandoned mining property of considerable extent.

There were buildings, machinery and chutes. The same influence that frightened people away from the La Grande Hotel, from the old gulf railroad route—the proximity of Sierra Tom—probably prevented the owners of these mines from getting at least wreckage money out of their property.

There was a square abode, but at the edge of the ravine, and here their captors hurried them.

It had but one entrance—a sheet-iron door, provided with an immense padlock.

"I reckon you won't get out of there in a hurry, my friends," chuckled the leader of the quartet.

"See here," began Frank, craving a parley and hoping to gain some trace of the possible whereabouts of the three captured diamond experimentalists, some inkling of their own fate.

"No, see here!" guffawed the giant fellow, giving both boys a push past the threshold of the hut that sent them tumbling promiscuously to its floor.

"Say your prayers!" jeered another of the four, significantly, to Gil.

"Make up a pretty clear yarn, if you don't want to be made a sieve of by Sierra Tom," interlarded a fellow-outlaw to Frank.

Clang!

The great door slammed shut on the two boys. They heard the padlock adjusted. Frank shivered at the ominous sounds.

"Gil," he spoke, "what are you going to do?"

"Untie this rope first."

It was pitchy dark in the place. Not a ray of light penetrated.

The fingers of the two devoted friends got into all kinds of

tangles groping to untie the rope that had secured their arms together.

"Got your end off?" inquired Gil, after a spell of working.

"Yes," assented Frank.

"Sit still a minute, then, till I look around," directed Gil.

"Look around?"

"What's the matter with that?"

It seemed that Gil was prepared for contingencies common to an isolated experience in the wilderness, for he flared a match, and by its rays Frank saw that his companion was lighting a piece of candle.

"Good for you!" he commenced, trying to cheer up.

"Yes, this is better," affirmed Gil, practically. "Now, then, let's find out what kind of a place we're shut into."

Gil went all around the walls of the place. There was not a break in uniform solidity except at the door.

"Adobe composition," Frank heard him murmur. "Not hard to kick a hole through that. Ah! I change my mind—it is."

"Is what?" asked Frank, as Gil gave the wall a kick with his heel, but did not repeat the operation.

"Hard to get out. The adobe simply covers sheet-iron plates."

"Well!"

"I see what this house is—it was the storage vault of the mines. Come and help me, Frank."

Gil had set his candle on the floor, and, seizing an iron ring sunk in a grooved board, was tugging at it.

Frank bent over and got a grip, too.

"She's giving," uttered Frank in a gasp. "Whew!"

Back flew the door, carrying both boys with it. They laughed over the mishap of skinned knuckles and bumped heads. The zest of ardent investigation temporarily shadowed their recent uncertainty and dread.

A cavernous abyss yawned beneath the trapdoor, and noisome, noxious vapors arose.

"What is it?" queried Frank, pressing close to the side of his peering companion.

"Some part of the system of the mine."

"A shaft—a pit?"

"I don't know," returned Gil, thoughtfully. "The rays of the candle don't go far enough down to show, but we must find out."

"Why?"

"Why, Frank?—the most natural reason in the world, of course."

"And that is?"

"By that hole we escape, or not at all."

Frank fluttered mightily. He had not been thinking of escape.

He watched Gil as the latter took a cartridge from his pocket.

"Keep very quiet, Frank," he directed, leaning over the open trap space, poising the cartridge, letting it drop squarely in the center and then bending his ear in a pose of concentrated attention.

Frank held his breath. They had to go down that hole, and he was anxious to know if it was very deep.

One second, two, three, four—suddenly a distant snap, feeble as that of a toy cap pistol, was heard.

Gil met his friend's glance calculatingly.

"Well?" interrogated Frank, with eagerness. "Will we have to go far to reach the bottom?"

"I should say," replied Gil, quietly, "a matter of about twelve hundred feet."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DISAPPEARING CANDLE.

"Twelve hundred feet!" repeated Frank in a startled voice.

"Yes," nodded Gil, "it's certainly that far to the bottom of the hole."

"Then it's useless to think of trying it."

"Not at all."

"Eh?"

"Anything is better than Sierra Tom."

Gil pronounced the outlaw's name in a tone that was grawsome, threatening and convincing all at once.

"There's little doubt of that," acceded Frank, promptly. "I'm with you, Gil!"

"Now, then!"

Gil had been swaying the candle several feet down into the shaft with one hand and feeling with the other.

"I know enough about mines to guess what I'm diving into," he remarked. "There's a ladder here, Frank."

"Good!"

"But it's primitive, upright tree log standards and ricketty pine steps. Everything depends on care and caution."

Gil proceeded to adjust, by means of a string, the piece of candle to one shoulder.

He started the descent, directed, and Frank explicitly following instructions, let the trap cover slam shut after them.

It was an awesome situation—the trickle of water, the heavy air, the jiggling of the support sections and the ominous creaking of the cross pieces were attendant auxiliaries to peril and uncertainty that did not tend to put much soul in a fellow.

Once a rotted rung snapped in two, and Frank's heart stood still as there was a scramble on the part of his companion of terrific portent.

"Landed!" was the cheering word that greeted Frank at the end of ten minutes' slow dropping, inch by inch—six hundred seconds of suspense, each one of which he had registered with a pained, timorous pulse throb.

"You don't mean the bottom so soon, Gil?" asked Frank, groping with his feet beyond the end of the ladder and touching a solid rock flooring.

"The hole runs down—see?" and Gil flared the candle beyond where they stood; "straight down, but the ladder ends here. We've struck the first level. It must slant to fresh air somewhere."

Gil released the candle from shoulder and string and began an adjacent investigation.

He came back to Frank with an excited but serious face.

"Where are we?" questioned the latter.

"In the heart of the mine, I should say."

"And the way out?"

"Ways, Frank?—there's a confusing plurality of them, and that's the trouble. There must be as many as a dozen drifts, all slanting east."

"That's toward the ravine?"

"Seems so."

"Then we can hardly miss it."

"Not if the candle holds out. I'd hate to be caught in one of those tunnels, full of all kinds of dangerous slants and pitfalls, in complete darkness. Rest a minute. That's it. We'll sit down here, get our breath and just chance luck by taking the nearest tunnel branching at our back. What's that?"

The boys had seated themselves, but they got up quite as promptly.

The silent shaft had suddenly echoed with a fusillade, the source of which they readily guessed.

Bullets rattled, pinging and thudding; then a lighted pine torch came flaring past them, then another, followed by hurtling pieces of rock.

"Bound to wipe us out if we were anywhere on the ladder, which we didn't happen to be," remarked Gil.

"It's the outlaws—they have discovered our escape."

"Of course."

"And may come down after us?"

"Hence, we'll put, prompt and brisk," was Gil's blunt rejoinder. "Frank, I don't know as I'm doing right in leading you into all sorts of trouble, where we will have to fight our way every inch of the journey."

"What would you do—leave me up there to be butchered?" demanded Frank.

"You're grit!" declared Gil, admiringly.

"We've both got to be if we ever expect to see day light again."

Silence brooded once more as the two boys started forward. They came to where a broad face of rock was penetrated with blasted tunnels.

Down the first Gil started, and Frank followed.

"This is not so bad," commented the latter.

"Not if it don't lead us right out where a dozen fellows are waiting to trap us," replied Gil.

After a considerable winding, always on a downward trend, the two explorers finally emerged into a large rock cavity big enough for a ball room.

All the other tunnels, they saw, ended here as well. Gil looked puzzled and Frank inquiring.

"I can hardly make this out," spoke the former. "There's a hole boarded in. Wonder what that is? And here—I see, Frank!"

"Do you, Gil?"

"Yes—look! Here's a great boxed-in dumping bin. The tunnels drift the blast here, and they are shovelled into the bin. There must be sluices running from it. We won't try getting out that way. Let's see what other outlet there is."

Gil tipped the candle to pour a hot drop or two of grease on what he supposed to be a rock splinter lying on the floor.

It hardened and stood safe, and, directed by the steady flare, both boys proceeded toward an opening cut in the solid rock.

"Here we are!" declared Frank, peering ahead.

"Yes, this the exit from the mine. It's straight sailing now."

"Say, Gil! it's getting dark."

"The candle must be going out—"

"Crackey!"

With a yell Frank jumped forward as he turned.

"For goodness sake!" shouted Gil.

An amazing, a mystifying spectacle greeted their vision.

The candle was walking away.

CHAPTER XVIII.

POWDER!

As if it had feet, the candle was crossing the floor.

At this marvel, at this miracle, Frank and Gil stared in petrified astonishment.

Then they started on a run after the receding light.

Before they could overtake it, however, making straight for the boarded up place they had noticed before, the disappearing phenomenon slid under the inch or two of space beneath the boards, leaving Frank and Gil in complete darkness.

"I say!" voiced the latter.

"Ouch!"

Frank had flopped down on the disappearing candle, had missed it and ran his hand promptly under the boards after it.

A snapping catch clutched his forefinger, bringing the blood.

"Gil," he panted, "know what it was?—a turtle."

"A what?"

"A snapping turtle. What else? It just nipped me. Don't you see? You thought it was a splinter of rock that you stuck the candle to. As soon as it began to warm up the turtle made off."

"And we're left in a pretty fix!" remarked Gil, ruefully. "Can we get beyond that barrier? Try and tear down the boards—"

"Look out, Gil!"

"Hello!"

"Yes, we're cornered."

Promptly both boys turned at a glare of advancing light.

It was approaching steadily through the corridor they had just discovered.

Frank could hear his companion's breath come in short, anxious jerks.

"Do you want to risk facing them?" demanded Gil, rapidly.

"Not if it can be avoided."

"Do you want to risk the ore dumping box?"

"As a hiding place? The very thing! They may not think to look there."

It was the very first place that three sinister pairs of eyes did look, one minute after the boys had jumped down into a huge box, the bottom of which was littered with lumps of rock and soil.

"Thought they'd come this way," ominously croaked a gruff voice. "You two come up here!"

Gil gave Frank a push so sudden that it was something almost in the nature of an assault.

The movement crowded Frank back into a box-like space about three feet square, and Gil followed him close.

"Back and down," spoke the latter, grimly.

"Back and down where?"

"Into the sluice chute."

"Is it—"

"Our only resource. No surrender!"

Zip!

Frank's breath was jolted out of him as he obeyed orders and took a tremendous slide of about twenty feet.

Here was another box-like compartment, and he had sense enough to crowd to one edge so that Gil would not land on him.

His companion arrived at his side. Frank heard him feeling around.

"The sluice water pipe runs in here," reported Gil. "Take the next section down. Quick Frank! Those fellows may get to shooting."

"More likely hurry and grab us where this thing ends."

"Worse than that! Oh, hasten! hustle!"

The sluice chute had begun where the ore chute ended.

A new kind of progress was now possible, for cleats were nailed every three feet to catch coarse lumps of ore.

"It's like a ladder," began Frank, and then he traced abruptly the cause of Gil's urgency.

Down came a spatter of water. It grew to a trickle.

"Say!" bolted out Frank.

"They have opened the water gates up there," declared the voice above him.

The trickle grew in volume. Soon it was a stream.

Frank slid, fell, dropped. It was a wild scramble now. The water grew to a blinding, choking, deluging gush.

BRAVE AND BOLD.

"Keep it up!" gasped Gil's encouraging voice. "Daylight ahead!"

"Whew!"

Frank shot out where the chute, running on standards, was open clear down to a little creek.

The water was racing as in a mill-course. It stopped over the unprotected top, and over it, too, Frank lifted himself and dropped ten or twelve feet to the ground.

He rubbed his water-dashed eyes to see Gil by his side, but another person as well within an undesirable proximity.

"March!" sounded a stentorian voice.

"It was no use, after all our trouble!" murmured Gil, regretfully.

Not ten feet away stood a man, and he looked as ugly as the great cannon of a pistol he levelled.

There was no way of mistaking his directions, for a trodden path led up the ravine side.

Frank and Gil proceeded along this, and the man kept up with them.

"Go on, there!" he ordered, as they faced the mouth of an excavation.

For fifty feet it was blind, though smooth, progress. Then the boys came upon a light, three men and the very rocky compartment where they had lost their candle.

"Got them, eh?" chirped a familiar voice, and the boys recognized the giant leader of their morning jaunt.

He walked up to the crestfallen Frank and Gil, clutched an arm of each, marched them to the end of the place furthest away from the ore dump and gave each a push up against the smooth rock wall.

"Well, youngster," he remarked, eying Gil coolly, "you've had your trouble for your pains."

"Oh, it was a little variety!" retorted Gil, bracing up like steel.

"You're a hot one!"

"Am I?"

"But you'll soon be a cold one—desperately cold."

Gil acted unconcerned.

"Sierra Tom would about tear you to pieces if he got his hands on you. He's heard about you. He knows the sneaking and the reporting and the evil you've done him generally, but I'm a merciful man. Fair, square, proper shuffling off the coil, say I. You're to die like a gentleman!"

"Thank you!" observed Gil with a cool courtesy that gave Frank the shivers.

"Why have we got to die at all!" he cried, involuntarily.

"Well, well! Here's the boldest chicken in the coop!" guffawed the giant. "Say, lad, you actually amuse me! This fellow hasn't done more to down Sierra Tom than all the policemen in California, has he?"

"I don't know," murmured Frank.

"You didn't play Belton any sly tricks yourself, did you?"

"He's to be searched, you know, for them papers," put in a second outlaw.

"Easier when he's quieted down. Get ready, fellows. Orders is orders. Young man, how will you have it?"

"Have what?" projected Gil, and his mask of reckless indifference never broke.

"Eyes shut, back to the troops, or face about—"

"Every time! Say, you miserable assassins!" blazed out Gil, the smoldering volcano bursting its bounds at last; "listen to me. Murder is your toy, robbery your second nature, but, mark you! the signal I fired to-day has gone around the civilized world! You fancy yourselves safe. You are rats in a safe trap, mark me! and remember, when the gallows comes, as it will come, to

the last one of you, that you vilest deed was, not dealing out to me what I might expect, but murdering in cold blood this innocent boy, this friend, who never did you an injury."

If quicksilver had been suddenly infused into his veins, Frank would not have experienced a greater stimulation than that brought about by the heroic words that thrilled him to the soul.

He put out a hand to Gil, trembling, not with fear, but something of that daring emotion that pervades the being of the soldier on the battle field, who, in the mad dash of glory, forgets self and knows he is only one of many.

"Gil," he whispered, "don't mind me. We'll show them the courage of right, like men!"

Gil's words had madly infuriated the leader of the group.

Hitherto he had been facetious. The under surface ferocity of his nature blazed out now.

"Gallows!" he growled. "First shot!" he shouted to the others, who had drawn their revolvers. "You cackling bird of ill-omen, say your last word!"

"The government will speak it."

"Bah!"

Click!

"Stop!"

The big ruffian had raised his weapon. The hand of one of his comrades swept it down, the same hand pointing warily to one side.

"Look!" its owner stammered.

"Eh? Zounds!"

Frank and Gil looked, too.

Emerging from under the bottom of the boarded-in space there crawled into view the turtle.

The blazing candle was still on its back.

It crept a few steps and then, instinct warning it of danger among so many intruders, the turtle as promptly turned and retreated into its covert once more.

"A candle!" cried the leader of the outlaws.

"Lighted!"

"In there!"

"Run for your life!"

The bewildered boys saw the outlaws turn like arrant cowards.

The rock chamber was emptied in a single instant.

Gaping, staring to try and guess the secret of this strange intervention in their behalf, Gil looked at Frank and Frank back at him, and both thrilled grousomely as a parting voice explained the mystery of the sudden fright:

"A lighted candle in the powder magazine!"

CHAPTER XIX.

BLOTTED OUT!

"A lighted candle!"

"In the powder magazine!"

Frank Warren shot out half the dread sentence as if he was spitting out hot lead.

His stanch friend, Gil, finished it with a start as if pricked with a pin.

"Run!" he added in a gasp.

"For our lives!" fluttered Frank.

With a single impulse, the two boys joined hands. It was a flying skelter down the dark rock corridor.

The sudden light of day dazzled their eyes as they came out into it, yet neither dared to falter.

For all they knew sufficient powder was stored at the turtle's mercy in the rocky vault to lift a mountain.

"The alarm has gone out!" panted Frank, not relaxing his gait. "See—everybody is running."

"Stop!"

Gil's command partook of the essence of an unmistakable cheer. "Why?" began Frank, and stared in wonder.

Pandemonium seemed let loose. From two of the mine buildings a fusillade was pouring forth, and right into it, returning the hot, steady fire, a body of uniformed men were moving with un-wavering system.

"Soldiers!" cried Frank.

"My signal! The government has acted!" exclaimed Gil, intensely excited. "They have just arrived. Mercy!"

What happened Frank instantly guessed. The light on the turtle's back had done its deadly work in the powder magazine.

What ensued for the space of a moment or two Frank never afterward clearly recalled.

All was riot, wreck and confusion. He was lifted from his feet and hurled to the ground as by a mighty earthquake shock.

He struggled erect, staggeringly, to view buildings tottering, smoke and flame hissing from the ground, and, above it all, amid the frenzied dash of human beings, shots and yells rang out.

He could not make out Gil for the enveloping wreaths of smoke about him. Suddenly Frank sprang aside.

A superb horse bearing a superb rider nearly ran him down.

"Halt!"

Twenty paces beyond six uniformed soldiers held leveled their deadly Winchesters.

The horseman brought his magnificent steed to its haunches and shot back a malediction at the cold steel menace.

Frank was so near to him that, as his glance shifted, it took him within its sweep.

"Ha!" was all that left the rider's lips, but his eyes snapped.

He reached out his arm. Quick as a flash, he lifted the wondering Frank from the ground and swung him behind him in the saddle.

"Up!"

The horse actually screamed with the pain inflicted by the sharply-dug rowel in its side.

"Boy!" hissed the rider's voice; "cling, shield me, or I will turn and send a bullet through your brain!"

Bang! Bang! Crack! Ping! A leaden hail passed all around the two riders.

"Bring down the horse—don't shoot the boy!" rang out a commanding voice.

"Free!"

With an exultant yell the mad, reckless rider turned into a narrow, descending path, shut in by towering rocks, blocking the sight of pursuers.

Crouching close to him, Frank held his breath. It seemed that a swerve, a slip, going at that tremendous rate of speed, would precipitate horse and riders to instant death alike.

"On!"

Frank felt as if he was behind some flying phantom. The horse seemed winged. He closed his eyes, chilling with terror, as, squarely in front of them, appeared a broad chasm.

One easy swing and the horse was over. Frank Warren could not repress a fervent utterance:

"Magnificent!"

On and on, through dried-up water courses, over steep hills, by difficult ledge routes, the horse kept up that mad, reckless pace. Then, at the edge of an opening, its rider halted it—foam-lathered, panting, lurid-eyed.

"Now, boy, to settle up with you!"

The man sprang to the ground, carrying Frank with him. His

eyes blazed with excitement and ferocity. He had drawn a murderous-looking knife.

"With me?" faltered Frank. "Why, I just saved your life!"

"What is that to the ruin you have wrought to all my plans?" hissed the man.

"Say! Are you Sierra Tom?"

The truth had suddenly dawned on Frank—it simultaneously brought an abrupt conviction to the mind of the sanguinary rider.

"Hello!" he muttered. "Come to look, you're not the spy."

"The other one Belton told me about," continued the man Frank now knew to be the famous fugitive outlaw. "Well—git!"

Frank realized that he was spared. He lingered, however. He felt he must question Sierra Tom as to the three diamond experimentalists—Batterman, of Amsterdam; Velasquez, of Brazil, and Powell, of New York.

"If I might ask you a question," he began.

"Boy, you had better go before I change my mind!" ground out Sierra Tom. "There will be a power after you inside of three minutes that will make you wish you had made the start."

"What does he mean?"

Frank retreated slowly. The man was now in a half-stooping posture, where some high grass grew, and seemed going through the maneuvers of a person mowing more than anything else.

"He's up to some dodge to baffle pursuit," soliloquized Frank. "What a pity I have no weapon! If I had, I declare I'd risk trying to take that bold fellow up against the reward offered for him!"

Frank had not proceeded fifty paces before he made a discovery.

This was the fact that he had reached a little pool of water he distinctly recognized as a point he had passed that morning in the company of the four outlaws.

"Why, I know where I am," he murmured. "That wild ride mixed me all up. The outlaw camp is up there. The place where I met Gil is down there—yes, there's the very cabin where he led the outlaws and cut the rope signal."

Frank was instantly moved by two contending impulses.

A powerful one influenced him toward at once returning to the attacked camp of the outlaws.

There, he felt certain, the soldiers had gained the victory, and there he would find Gil—perhaps Belton—surely the three friends of John Gillespie, the diamond-maker—Batterman, Velasquez and Powell.

On the other hand, less than a mile away was the old hut where Gil had fired the signal, and an equal distance to the east beyond it was the grove of trees where they had taken refuge from the bloodhounds.

"See here!" exclaimed Frank, "my course is plain. While so near I'll hurry to the tree where Gil carved the middle syllable of the missing ingredient word. I'll copy it on something, get back to the outlaw camp and be in the very best shape in the world to talk business to Batterman, Velasquez and Powell."

Full of this plan and back on the old fascinating trail of the diamond-maker's secret once more, Frank started, with the hut in view as a guiding point to the tree.

He had not gone twenty yards, however, when he turned like a flash at an ominous, snapping sound.

"Goodness!" he voiced.

A wall of fire was approaching him. He saw now what Sierra Tom meant when he had warned him that there would be a power after him inside of three minutes that would make him wish he had made the start advised.

Sierra Tom was speeding away at his old mad, reckless course to the north.

Between him and Frank the long grass was ablaze. Dry as

BRAVE AND BOLD.

tinder, it leaped at shrub and bush, licked them up and roared its way forward toward the timber with incredible rapidity.

It had acquired a double crescent shape—probably so purposely started by the outlaw, an undoubted expert in woodcraft.

One dip of the same was eating its way broadly across the stretch which pursuers from the outlaw camp would be likely to come, the other was cutting in toward the old hut.

Frank instantly saw that to gain a safe point he must get across a bare eminence just beyond him.

He could not now get to the outlaw camp if he wished, nor could he reach the tree he wanted by way of the hut.

"I'll keep down the south slant of the hill and cross over when I get about opposite the grove of trees," planned Frank.

He adopted the course formulated at once. Out of sight, the fire was out of mind. Frank noticed that considerable smoke and feathery cinder dust came even across the range, but he believed all the time he was leaving the blaze behind him.

He was busy reflecting. Now that the ordeal of the morning had been passed through, exciting and perilous as it was, it was as nothing except an experience.

Brighter, clearer, more favorable and promising than ever loomed up the great diamond-making project.

Frank calculated that when he told his story to the three experimentalists and supplied a copy of the secret syllables they would not fail to believe his statement that John Gillespie intended he should have a share in the glory and the returns.

"I'll work Gil in, if I can," mused the free-hearted Frank. "He's simply the best and bravest fellow I ever knew. Oh! things wouldn't have grazed us so marvelously if it wasn't down in the books that this diamond-making business should come to the front again as the guiding motive of my life."

Full of excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, Frank finally started to cross the little hill range—he must certainly be opposite the grove of trees where Gil had carved the secret syllable.

He was; but, with a frantic dash and then a dismayed cry, Frank, coming to the apex of the hill, felt all his plans of the present, all the hopes of the future vanish as in an uplifting puff of smoke.

The fire had swept down the open.

It had blotted out the cabin completely.

Passing this point, the flames had reached the grove of trees.

That grove, and, most desplorable of all, the very tree that bore the vital, mysterious second syllable of the missing ingredient was the center of a bounding, roaring vortex of flame.

CHAPTER XX.

ALL HIS OWN.

A pale moon glimmered down on a somber night, and Frank Warren helped fill in the picture.

Desolation was everywhere. For twenty miles the devastating fire had swept down the valley.

For in the distance now, it was a receding monster devouring new fuel.

Here in the grove where Frank and Gil had defied the bloodhounds that day, the flames had died down to black ashes that shifted in the night breeze with ghostly, shivering monuments.

Under the very tree where the mystic second syllable of the missing ingredient had been carved by Gil lay Frank, sound asleep.

It was no stately Titan of the forest now, however—only a gaunt, blackened spar, like its companions about it.

There Frank had mournfully dropped like the loser of a race. The spur of hope removed, he was paying the penalty of twenty-four hours of vivid excitement and action.

"Wake up!"

It must have been nearly midnight. Frank felt himself rudely shaken. He looked up with a start. Then his face lightened.

"Gil!"

"It's me, Frank. Thought I'd find you here, if anywhere."

"Oh, Gil!—the carved syllable—"

Frank choked and pointed up to the charred tree. Gil gave a sighful nod of sympathy.

"I know, Frank," he murmured; "blotted out, ashes, but—maybe the case isn't so hopeless. Take your mind from it for a few minutes. I want to tell you something. Back at the outlaw camp—"

"Oh, yes!" cried Frank, springing up, all life and interest. "There were three men there—Batterman, Velasquez and Powell?"

"You've got it right, Frank. One thing at a time, though. Sierra Tom escaped."

"Yes, he used me as a shield, thinking it was you, and got away."

"The rest of the outlaws are in chains or killed. Frank, they tell me I've done a big thing."

"Have you? Rather! You've broken up the terror that has hung over this section of California for years."

"If we had only caught the main fellow, Sierra Tom?" murmured Gil, regretfully; "but my work is done. The government acted on the signal in an hour. They call my task completed and well done, and all I've got to do is to forward a voucher to the branch office at San Francisco and get—one thousand dollars! Think of it, Frank—enough to carry me through—college, the dream of my life!"

Gil's face was aglow. The hero was lost sight of in the practical, energetic boy, thinking only of fitting himself for life by acquiring an education.

"They'd ought to pay you ten thousand dollars!" declared Frank, emphatically.

"What I want to come to is this," went on Gil. "The three men you mentioned were prisoners in the outlaw camp."

"Yes, I knew it."

"I heard them tell about losing some letters. I didn't want to pry into your secrets—I only wanted to help you."

"I know that, Gil, and I should have told you all about those secrets if I had found a chance."

"Anyway," pursued Gil, "little by little, I picked out a fact—the letters you had originally belonged to the three captured tourists. I went to them and made some inquiries. It made them curious. They were determined to leave the outlaw camp at once. I don't know why, but I fancied I might run across you here or on the way here. At all events, I accompanied them this far, and they are waiting over yonder, hoping to see you."

"What!" exclaimed Frank. "You don't mean—"

"Just what I say. Come and see them."

Frank followed his guide, all a-flutter. When they came to where three men were seated on a stone at the hill-top, Frank was so flustered he could scarcely speak.

Here were the three great experts of the diamond world—he stood before them at last. Batterman, of Amsterdam—Frank could tell him from the national characteristics, speaking, in build and face; Velasquez, of Brazil, dark-featured, proud, aristocratic; Powell, of New York, the quick, nervous, calculating business man complete.

"Is this the boy?"

It was the latter who propounded the question.

Frank stepped forward.

"This is the boy I told you about," assented Gil.

"Let me tell," began Frank, feeling that the way to avoid complications was to explain first, and he told them his story.

He was a little surprised when he came to speak regretfully of the lost syllable, when he came to his glowing anticipations if it could be found, that there was no enthusiastic response from the three notables.

"'Tis a strange story. This boy deserves to be something great. He has enthusiasm, he has patience, he has courage," phlegmatically observed Batterman.

"Oh, Gillespie only infused him with his visionary ideas," spoke Velasquez, indifferently.

"Sir!" began Frank, indignantly.

"Hold on, lad," interrupted Powell. "Easiest way is to have no discussions. Plainly, my two friends do not believe that John Gillespie could make diamonds—missing ingredient or no missing ingredient."

"But he said he could!" declared stanch Frank.

"Enthusiasts say many things they fancy they believe," observed Powell. "Truth is, our rough experience has sickened us of California, and I'm due in New York on important business."

We have no copy of the missing syllable, and we'll never be able to find any person who can make it out."

Frank looked terribly disappointed at this announcement.

"Therefore," continued Powell, "we are inclined to drop the affair and go back to our own line of experimenting. I ought to tell you, perhaps, that since we started we have seen how it would be very possible for our friend Gillespie to have made what he fancied were diamonds, but which in reality are not such at all."

"You give up all work on this splendid project!" cried Frank, incredulously.

Batterman, of Amsterdam, shrugged his shoulders; Velasquez, of Brazil, nodded with irritation; Powell smiled in a polite way.

"I think we shall be in pocket to do so," he asserted.

"You abandon the secret of the missing ingredient?"

"Yes."

"Can I have it?"

"That boy has a rare spark of genius!" declared Batterman, fairly startled at the forcible way in which Frank shot out his request. "Yes, you can have it."

"For all me, too," shrugged Velasquez.

"I have no time to bestow on further investigations," said Powell.

Frank arose up mightily. He felt like a giant. Faith in John Gillespie traversed every feature of his beaming, intelligent face.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I thank you, not only for the opportunity to investigate this magnificent secret, but for the chance to prove that John Gillespie was no dreamer. He made diamonds—I saw them. I shall yet make them, too!"

The three men arose. They were gentlemen, and they gave Frank a courteous adieu. Frank watched them go out of his life with queer emotions.

"Soured on a big thing," soliloquized Frank, "because, as John Gillespie said, they can't get the ripe fruit from the planted seed in an hour!"

All the time Gil had listened to what was said in a sort of a maze.

"Well, of all the queer tangles I ever struck!" he commented, as the three notables were lost to view. "Frank, it reads like a romance!"

"Don't you see it is no romance?" cried Frank, with spirit; "don't you see that it's hard work, perseverance, courage that is required, and those men are not willing to make the sacrifice? Look here, Gil—they gave me the secret?"

"Beyond all doubt."

"It's mine?"

"What you've got of it."

"I'll find out the rest—oh, never fear!" cried Frank, with confident resolution. "Gil, if you had known John Gillespie——"

"I know you."

"You don't mean——"

"That I believe in you—that I believe the missing ingredient makes diamonds? Why not? They are making gold in Chicago, a regular factory. Why shouldn't they make diamonds? What are you going to do next?"

"I don't know—let me think."

Let him think! Frank's head seemed bursting open with all the manifold and bewildering ideas and plans that filled it to repletion.

The secret was his, his alone—he, a homeless boy, was the sole possessor, the legitimate legatee of John Gillespie's Croesus secret.

A syllable in a name was missing. That found—it must be found, if he had to ransack the universe for it!

Past, present and future—actual accomplishment and plausible promises came up before Frank in concise review.

He saw with the eyes of faith, he planned with the soul of courage, he hoped with the hope of patience.

He went up to Gil, a-quiver with resolution and confidence.

"You asked me what I was going to do next, Gil, a minute ago?" he said.

"Yes."

"I am going to make diamonds, if diamonds can be made!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAGIC CRUCIBLE.

"It's cheap, you see, Frank!"

"What's that to a fellow with a thousand dollars in bank?"

"And easy."

"I won't dispute that part of it. Come ahead. The old scow belongs to nobody, and I'll go with you to San Francisco."

A good rest, a good meal, a good, sensible talk with his friend, Gil, had put Frank Warren in the best shape in the world. They had just discovered an old abandoned craft at a river's brink.

It had paid Frank to make a complete confidant of his new stalwart friend, for Gil had given him nothing but good advice—had even advanced offers of hearty co-operation.

Frank's first suggestion was to go back to the La Grande Hotel and see if some trace could not be gained by Belton, who had not been seen in the outlaw camp at the time of the descent of the troops.

His idea was to endeavor to coax or force the now baffled and penniless ex-clerk to help him prove his rightful claim to the Warren fortune in Los Angeles, so that he could get the means to promptly and properly pursue the diamond-making project.

From this plan Gil dissuaded Frank. He showed him how it was extremely improbable that Belton would go again to the tramps' paradise, and he doubted if Belton could be induced to risk making an enemy of his old-time pensioner, Fred Warren, on the mere promise of a moneymaking consideration.

"You need cash, Frank, for a fact," admitted Gil; "you have got to have it to support yourself while you chase down that missing syllable, you have got to have more to get the missing ingredient when you find out what it is, you have got to have still more to pursue your experiments when you have that. Well, come with me. Strike out a short cut direct for San Francisco. When we get there I'll lend you half of what is coming to me."

"What!" voiced Frank, incredulous. "You have got that much faith in my prospects?"

"I have that faith in you. I've said it—you're welcome."

It was just after this conversation that the boys came across an old ore scow on the river.

Gil knew the geography of the country by heart. He showed Frank how they could follow the stream for over one hundred and seventy-five miles, bringing them to an active railroad point, whence progress to San Francisco would be easy.

"It's better than a tramp across country to Los Angeles, and you have no particular business there at present," he declared. "I've got enough provisions in this package I made up at the outlaw camp to last us for several days. We'll just float where its deep, pole where it's shallow and spend the time getting better acquainted."

"I couldn't know you any better for a royally good fellow in a thousand years!" declared Frank, with vehement enthusiasm.

"Oh, you don't know my faults. I'm an envious fellow, Frank."

"You?"

"Pon my word. The more I get to thinking of your diamond-making secret the more I get wishing I was in your boots."

"Honest?"

"For a fact."

"Say——"

"I know what you're going to say—take half. That's you all over, but—nay, nay, Pauline!" as the actor says—I'll help you with money if you need it—with advice, with co-operation. I'll aid you in getting your prospects to the budding point. Then, if you'd hire me, I'll put in still school begins working for you at so much a day."

"Well, for a proposition!" railed Frank; "the capitalist furnishes the funds, the brains, and the other hires him! Gil, come in with me. Let's make or break on the diamond-making business together."

"I'll think of it," murmured Gil, and went to whistling softly and thoughtfully to himself.

It was like a picnic, a sort of beneficent calm after the storm, the next two days of facile drifting down the river.

Frank noticed that his companion kept out a keen watch along the shores.

"I believe you've come this way because Sierra Tom came this way," declared Frank.

"Not at all," dissented Gil.

"You're hoping to get a trace of him, I'll bet?"

"Yes, incidentally. Why not? It's two thousand dollars if we should round him up."

"We?"

BRAVE AND BOLD.

"You'd get half, certainly."

"Just as you're going to take half on the diamond business? Oh, I see!" smiled Frank.

"'Nuff sed!—don't throw yer millions around as if they were marbles!"

"Oh, I'll have you wild enough when you catch the real flare of diamond-making!" declared Frank, positively. "There's a hail!"

"I did hear some one."

"First person we've met since we started, if it is a person," remarked Frank, peering keenly at the bush-lined banks. "Hello! there's action! Get out the revolvers, Gil."

From the outlaw camp Gil had brought two of these weapons. They were ready at hand, and the boys were promptly armed.

There came a second demonstration from the shore, a less vague shout now.

"Help!"

A man crashed through the bushes, slid down the little embankment and landed knee-deep in the water.

"A Greaser!" commented Gil.

"Carrying something as if it was glass."

The dusky, Mexican-faced arrival looked frightened. He breathlessly glanced back of him, and then cried imploringly to the boys:

"Take me aboard!"

"What's the row?" asked Gil.

"Chased."

"Who by?"

There was no need of asking. Just as Frank poled so near to the wader that he managed to climb aboard two fellows of his own type of countenance were visible in pursuit.

At a sight of Gil's revolver they executed a prompt retreat.

"Who are they?" interrogated Frank.

"Sneaks—thieves! They would strip a fellow down to his suspenders if they caught him."

"And who are you?"

"I—oh, I am delivering some goods for the priests down at Rabida."

"Who to?"

"A man up in the mountains a few miles distant. It is just beyond the bend in the river, not more than two leagues. Can I remain on your craft till we reach it?"

"Certainly," nodded Gil.

Frank rather curiously regarded the "goods" the fellow was delivering.

It resembled some kind of a crock, carefully packed in grass matting, and the man placed it at the rear of the scow.

Frank succeeded in getting into a conversation with the fellow, who could speak English fairly well.

He said that the bundle he was carrying was a crucible which had been bought by a chemist from the monks of La Rabida, and to whom he was then taking it.

"What is the name of the man who engaged in chemical work in these wilds?" asked Gil, carelessly.

The Mexican held out a card and Frank and Gil glanced at the name on it.

They nearly fell out of the boat with astonishment, for the name written on the card was that of

MR. JOHN GILLESPIE.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

Two hours later the boys were shaking hands with John Gillespie—the same old Gillespie in the flesh and blood.

They found him living in a large laboratory which he had fitted up in a ruined church in the wilderness.

With him was a keen-looking gentleman, who he introduced as Mr. Arnold Tyler, broker and man of business.

Mr. Gillespie's face was marked with scars, one of his ears was gone, but he had a hearty welcome for Frank.

He had gone temporarily insane after the explosion which wrecked his laboratory, and when he had recovered Frank had disappeared.

Then he had gone out in search of the missing ingredient—Montholite—and discovered it in considerable quantities near the old ruin.

"And have you made diamonds?" asked Frank, eagerly.

"Something just as good," said Gillespie, pointing to a glittering black stone on a nearby table, "black diamonds."

"But 'just as good,' you said," put in Frank, eagerly.

"Just as good, Frank—every bit of it; except for being a brooch or a ring setting, better. What we have discovered," continued Gillespie, animatedly, "is a substitute for diamonds."

"But if it's not the real thing, what is its value?" projected Frank.

"I'll answer you that by telling you something," replied Gillespie. "A year or two ago the French Academy offered a ten-thousand-dollar prize for a substance to take the place of diamonds in drills."

Frank started comprehendingly now.

"For putting around the edges of large circular saws employed in cutting huge slabs of stone, for jewels for watches, for glass cutting, for coloring artificial teeth."

"And you've got it?"

"We have discovered it. My young friends, which is better—to be able to make an ornament that simply flashes, or to discover that which will entirely revolutionize those industries where abrasives are employed?"

"And this—"

"Carbide of titanium, that's what we call it," supplied Gillespie.

"Yes, sir?"

"Is harder than diamonds—it can be employed in cutting them. Why, they've been using bort heretofore. One lump found in Brazil two years ago, weighing 3,073 carats, was sold for one hundred and twenty thousand dollars. They export fifty thousand carats from Bahia every year. Reckon up what these little sparklers, made in an hour, mean in the way of clear, cold cash for Gillespie & Co."

After a long talk, in which Gillespie offered to take the boys into partnership with him, he turned to Frank and said:

"I have some other good news for you."

"This is the boy I was telling you about," he added, turning to Mr. Tyler.

"Well, then," said Tyler, "I might as well inform him that he has inherited a fortune of thirty thousand dollars."

Frank nearly fainted from excitement, and a long explanation followed.

Mr. Gillespie had told Mr. Tyler, his friend, who was a lawyer, as well as a broker, Frank's story of how he was cheated out of his fortune.

The lawyer had taken the matter in hand some time before, and although they had never expected Frank to appear again, the case was investigated very thoroughly and the dissipated and foolish Fred Warren forced to confess the forgery which Belton had committed.

The lawyer had taken a percentage of two per cent. of the money as his fee and left the remainder in a bank in Frank's name.

So Frank was now a rich man.

As for Belton and Sierra Tom, they never bothered Frank again, and they are probably both dead long ago.

Frank agreed to put his money into the business of making black diamonds, investing half of it in Gil's name.

"There's one thing you can do for me, Mr. Gillespie," suggested Frank, after everything had been settled.

"What's that, partner?"

"Change me back to the old, real Frank Warren."

"Ah! Remove the stain from your face? That's right, lad. You're through with the perils, the risk, the hardship of the experiments—now, in your proper person, winning the rightful rewards of energy, pluck and perseverance, get ready to enjoy the golden fruits of a California Boy's Diamond Luck."

THE END.

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